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JUNE \ 07

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ISSUE 07 \ JUNE 2007 \ THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

13-PAGE SPECIAL FEATURE

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BLACK TEMPLE AND BEYOND

DEVELOPERS' FAVORITE ZONES, BOSSES AND QUESTS
INSIDER TOUR OF AZEROTH

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

HELLGATE

WHY BILL ROPER THINKS YOU'LL PAY MONTHLY

PLUS: MYTHOS, FLAGSHIP'S FREE RPG

IN THE HOTSEAT!
PETER MOORE
IS LIVE FOR PC WORTH $50?

HANDS-ON
TEAM FORTRESS 2
NO MORE GRENADES–WTF?

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ESRB: TEEN T — Mild Blood, Mild Language, Violence

Game Experience May Change During Online Play

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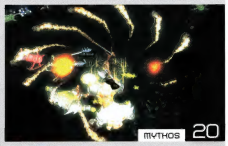

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BUNGIE

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THIS MONTH ON GFW07.1UP.COM

Delve even deeper into the *World of WarCraft* with interviews with some of the game's creators. Also, tag along with *GFW* and the 1UP Show for a behind-the-scenes look at *Team Fortress 2*.

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FREE STYLE STREET BASKETBALL

TO AZEROTH ONCE AGAIN

Or why we're all living in the world of *WarCraft*

Right about the time you read this, on May 19, the folks at Blizzard are going to be making—according to them—some kind of humongous announcement over in South Korea. What that announcement is I cannot say. It's not because I know what it is and am just being all secretive. I wish. It's actually because, even after a great deal of begging, cajoling, and crying, I was not able to weasel even one drop of information about it out of them. They are stealthy bastards that way. Still, one can make educated guesses about these things. And when you combine "big exciting announcement that we promise you don't want to miss" plus South Korea, where a certain game is a national obsession, how is it possible to imagine it's anything but *StarCraft 2*? Or is that just wishful thinking on all our parts? We'll all know soon enough. If only I could use my Eye of Kilrogg to sneak into their office and get the scoop! LOL!

Meanwhile, we did manage to get some stuff out of them—enough for a 13-page story, anyway—about their current big game, which you may have heard of before. It's called *World of WarCraft*, and it has graced the cover of our magazine a whopping three times now. And if you think that's overkill, then I will submit to you that any game that compels 8.5 million people to pay a recurring fee to play is one we are going to continue to look at. This month's story, in particular, examines how the phenomenon has affected those making the game itself. It's more "human interest" than "world-exclusive scoop", and I hope even non-*WOW* fans take the time to read it, as it gives great insight into what goes on behind the scenes for those managing a monster like *WOW*. Big-time kudos to managing editor Sean Molloy for seeing this one through.

Also, while I have your attention, let me direct you to two other fine features in this month's issue. Shawn Elliott conducted a fantastic interview with Microsoft honcho Peter Moore about the upcoming Live initiative, asking all the tough questions that I hope you've come to expect from us by this point. And contributing editor Matt Peckham sat down with mad genius Oleg Maddox, creator of the acclimed WWII flight sim *IL-2 Sturmovik*, as well as the upcoming *Storm of War: Battle of Britain*. It's a great read even for gamers like me, who feel more comfortable flying gryphons than airplanes.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *Sam & Max: Episode 1—Culture Shock, Marathon, Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

Weep not, zoo tycoon. They'll name the monkey house in your memory.

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft, S.T.A.L.K.E.R., GROW RPG*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

Ryan's mind is a swirling miasma of scintillating thoughts and turgid ideas.

Now Playing: Classic LucasArts adventures via ScummVM
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

This space is dedicated to spring.

Now Playing: *Rainbow Six: Vegas*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

Ding! Fine-Print Reader medal! You just got 100 Achievement points for reading this bio! You are now supercool.

Now Playing: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R., Streets of Rage Remake, Command & Conquer 3*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (STAFF)

Loathes yet another preview of a WWII game that opens with a line like "here's yet another WWII game."

Now Playing: *IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946, Silent Hunter: Wolves of the Pacific, Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

Rosie doesn't know Archimonde from Kerazhan or Auchindoun from a hole in the ground—and she prefers it that way.

Now Playing: Back to the ol' DS
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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Letters

Note: We also accept cash

LETTER OF THE MONTH

OLDSTERS, UNITE!

I was utterly appalled at [Gearbox Software president] Randy Pitchford's comments ("Love + Hate," *GFW* #5, pg. 51) concerning older people and gaming, and the supposed generation gap that vastly exists in the Grand Canyon. "Fortunately, and this is going to sound really rough, old people get older and eventually go away," he says. Hmph!

According to a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, the average age of a gamer in Linden Lab's *Second Life* is 33, I'm 44 and in a *Battlefield 2* clan that regularly kicks ass in tournaments. Ninety percent of our clan members are in their mid- to late 30s, and we're growing all the time. I work for an ISP that supplies broadband to rural communities; we've sold accounts to more than a few people—car salesmen, firefighters, retired factory workers, and one grandma—who all wanted high-speed Internet access simply to be able to play *World of WarCraft*. Mr. Pitchford said, "Older generations are out of the equation." I agree... if he's referring to the Donkey Kong and Mario crowd. I'm soccer consoles from the start, and not because of age being an issue—but because I've always been a PC fan.

Mr. Pitchford claims the industry's present scope and future motivate him. Let it motivate him on down the hall to a console superstar.

Edward Barton

GFW EIC and resident geezer Jeff Green replies: Damn straight, Edward! You tell 'em! Old people rule, young people drool! Where the hell am I? Has anyone seen my back pills?

A *VANGUARD* VANGUARD

"What the...?"

That's all I could think after reading Scott Sharkey's review of *Vanguard* (*GFW* #6, pg. 74). I agree with the first paragraph in his review, but that's all I agree with. I have played *EverQuest I* and *II*, *World of WarCraft*, *Eve Online*, *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, and *Guild Wars* (I have no life). *Vanguard* has the best graphics by far of any of the games I just mentioned. Mr. Sharkey needs a new computer if he thinks the graphics aren't up to par. What is he talking about?

What sensible MMO developer wouldn't try to use the interface from the most popular game of all time (*WOW*)? Also, what fantasy MMO doesn't have "boring quests and high-fantasy clichés"? Even the great *WOW* has those...all pretty much cloned from *D&D* way back when I was starting to game on the PC in the late '80s (yes—I, too, am an old-timer at 39). I hope your readers are bright enough to try *Vanguard* for themselves, as your magazine has a history of low review scores on newly released games that were pushed out too fast (which, I agree, *Vanguard* was). I know, not your problem. You are just doing your jobs, and you do your jobs well, most of the time. I think you missed it on this game, though.

I have an idea: You should get reviewers who actually *enjoy* the type of game they're reviewing. It sounds to me like Sharkey doesn't really like MMOs at all. If *GFW* needs any help in the reviewing of MMOs, I will gladly volunteer, as long as you put me on the payroll.

I have tried just about all of the MMOs out there (except *Auto Assault*, as it was short-lived). With the exception of *EQ1*, I tired of the others very quickly. *WOW* was just too darn easy (no hate mail, please). Leveling 1-to-70 in a month is OK for some people, I guess (4 gazillion subscribers cannot be wrong)...but I prefer a challenge. I'm looking forward to enjoying *Vanguard* for a long time. I just think Sharkey blew it with this review, and hopefully, the game will make it—even though he pretty much burned it to the ground.

Granted, there were a lot of bugs when *Vanguard* released. Things are much better now, which makes me wonder when Sharkey reviewed it. The March 29 patch fixed all the bugs that I had problems with. Maybe I am just lucky, but I doubt that.

Robert Sohawk (75 Shaman, *EverQuest*)
Tator (56 Hunter, *World of WarCraft*)
Atreides (40 Paladin, *EverQuest II*)
Beatem (20 Warrior, *Guild Wars*)
Atreides (22 Paladin, *Vanguard*)

Wow, you're right! How could we miss that great game underneath all the bugs, boring quests, and punishing gameplay you mentioned? What were we thinking! After all, just because a game gets pushed out the door in an unplayable state six months too early (as even the developers themselves admitted), that's no reason to give it such a hard time. And our less snarky response is: The game was reviewed after weeks of play, in the state it was in at the time. As we've said before, we cannot review the future. We plan continued coverage of *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*, though, and will reevaluate it down the line as the game evolves—and we hope that we'll have some nicer things to say about it then.

WORLD OF WHAT?

Look, you guys are really starting to kill me about this whole *World of WarCraft* thing. You guys are getting *way* too obsessed with that game; in every issue, you mention *WOW* at least once on every page. Stop it!

Joel Murphy

Might we point you to our 13-page *World of WarCraft* cover story starting on pg. 48? Seriously, though...we don't go out of our way to fawn over *WOW*, but the fact is that it's a huge presence in the PC gaming scene...and as long as that's the case, we imagine it'll continue to be a conversation topic within these pages.

BLOOD ELVES ARE HOT!

Several times, I've been impressed with the artwork in the magazine. I've often wondered where it comes from, and what becomes of it after the magazine is published. *GFW* #5 finally inspired me to do something other than wonder—the two-page Blood Elf illustration in the Reviews section [pg. 70] really made an impression. After an hour of hunting around online, I couldn't figure out if it was "official art" from the game publisher or what. I certainly couldn't determine where I could acquire a copy (either electronic or print). Perhaps you could clue me and other readers in about the illustrative art used in your magazine?

KC

Art director Michael Jennings responds: "The rendered artwork that you see in the magazine either exists beforehand and is chosen for its quality after careful consideration or I will work with a game's development team to create a custom piece of art. The bottom line is that since the art takes up major real estate in the magazine it needs to help tell stories in a compelling way by bringing something interesting to the table...basically it needs to kick ass." >

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WHAT, ME WORRY?

As an avid listener of your podcast, I've noticed a trend: The *GFW* guys are tired of hearing about technical issues with PC games. Sure, they can be exhausting at times, but I assure you that the PC market is *much* better than the console side. Over the last 10 years, I've had to buy three PS2s, two Xboxes, and two Xbox 360s. You can do absolutely nothing when you see the PS2's "Disc Read Error" or the 360's "Three Lights of Death," except hope that the overlords will be kind enough to break down and fix your problem for free. Unfortunately, that hasn't been the case for me, and I've found myself spending just as much—if not more—on unreliable consoles, games, controllers, and memory cards than on a gaming PC. The real injustice: the fact that I'm doling out so much money for games that (at best) are half the quality of PC titles. Keep up the great work, guys, and I'll keep telling even my non–PC gaming friends to read.

Darius Keel

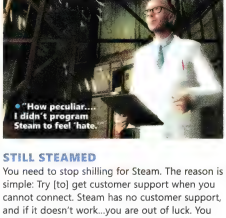
Darius, we are only hard on those we love. Make no mistake: We are die-hard PC gamers here. That's why we get so angry when we see potentially good games rushed out to market, only to be riddled with bugs and instability. It does PC gaming no good when publishers release shoddy products. That's why we'll continue to call it out every time it happens.

COOL IT

In your article "The Incredible Shrinking Game Machine" (*GFW* #6, pg. 92), you chose some decent parts for your "Dream Rig," but you also made some drastic mistakes. In order to use the 8800 GTX Water-Cooled Edition by BFG Tech, you need water-cooling parts...which are not listed, but you probably knew that. Then you also listed the PC Power & Cooling Turbo-Cool 1KW power supply; it's ample enough for the system, but it won't fit in the Qmicra case unless you do some cutting—and I doubt anyone would want to do that to a nice new case. So, just a little more research might help next time you decide to build a killer rig.

Brad

What? You're afraid of messing up your precious Qmicra case? Wuss! Writer Joe Rybicki's response: "You should be able to squeeze that PSU in there.... You just wouldn't be able to put in an optical drive—and technically, we *didn't* include an optical drive in that list. We're *that* hardcore! Erm, that's all I've got." He will answer for his mismeasurement crimes by writing his next story on a 486.



STILL STEAMED

You need to stop shilling for Steam. The reason is simple: Try [to] get customer support when you cannot connect. Steam has no customer support, and if it doesn't work...you are out of luck. You have no options. Not a one. So take the Steam challenge and see if you can get help.

I suspect that the reason is that Steam hates their customers and, with *Half-Life* being such an amazing game, they can afford to lose 10 percent and still be happy. Plus, the huge savings [from] not having to employ a bunch of [foreigners] to provide bad customer support.

So be a pal and write the truth: Steam still sucks. I find I can connect about one third of the time. And now I hate myself for looking forward to the next episode [of *Half-Life 2*]. So thanks to Steam for ruining my gaming experience.

Bastards.

Dave Fulford
Tempe, Arizona

XANTHOR LIVES!

I didn't get it. There has to be some joke—you definitely hyped it up enough to make me look for it, being a big RPG fan and all, but nothing, anywhere [*GFW* #6, pg. 98]. Was there some inside joke or history to *Xanthor* in the past that I didn't read in your mag?

Confused and disappointed that there is no *Cudgel of Xanthor*

Jeff Green responds: Wait, there is no *Cudgel of Xanthor*? Then what was that game that I previewed? Did I even go to Denmark? Where are my back pills?

GFW LOVE

When I listen to the podcast and read the magazine, I feel like I'm a part of something special. Some club, or movement, or just a way of thinking about gaming and the industry, part of a group of really smart people who are thinking *really hard* about their place in the world, the industry that they are a part of and cover, and who care deeply about being ethical while being journalists and advocates at the same time. You guys [have] an aura about you that just screams respect. I listen to the podcast and get your thoughts and feelings on the issues and whims and craziness that are in your minds, but also I get your thoughts, all the good ones and not-so-good ones you have about who you are and your place in the gaming industry. Then, when I pick up the mag, I feel like I see those thoughts and principles in action; I have the concrete *result* of a principled, thoughtful, and irreverent perspective on the world and the world of gaming. And it's great, man. It's great.

Overall, you guys really seem to be positioning yourselves as thoughtful, skeptical, and passionately nerdy journalists covering and commenting on the ins and outs of the industry as well as doing the usual preview/review duties of any respectable gaming magazine, and I can't say I've ever found any publication that does it better.

Mick (aka DoomMunky)

ROBERT COFFEY—SAURON?

Is it just me, or does the person in the front row of the *Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* advertisement in *GFW* #5 (pages 38 and 39) bear a striking resemblance to contributing editor Robert Coffey? Maybe he just shares the slightly sociopathic look....

David Beaver

It's not just you. We had the same reaction the first time we saw it (for those of you who are wondering and have the original ad handy, it's the guy on the far right in the front row—blown up above left). The real Robert (above right) assures us that this is, in fact, *not* him.

WE'RE CALLED *GFW* FOR A REASON

So, like, point blank—is *GFW* planning to include reviews of Xbox games? It is subtle, but I'm sensing an editorial drift in that direction.

Zuke

Nope. If it's console coverage you want, check out our sister publication, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*.

Long to have your questions answered in a snarky, obnoxious fashion in a public forum? E-mail gfwletters@ziffdavis.com today!

MAIL BYTES

StarCraft right-click control scheme? Tiberium crystals growing straight out of the ground? What was EA thinking??? C&C is officially dead to me (and only unofficially after *Tiberian Sun*).

Jason Barber

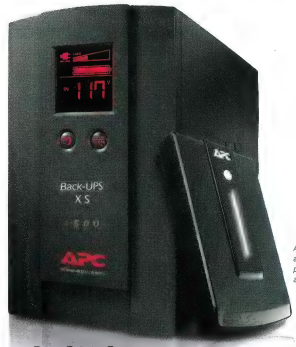
Dear Editor: I'm not an adventure-game fan—can't stand spending my time solving puzzles. Hence, I won't play *GFW*'s diabolical adventure game—*Figure Out How to Renew*.

Richard Rider

Come on, Green! I have a 70 Night Elf Hunter and a 70 Gnome Mage and a 60 Night Elf Druid, not to mention umpteen lesser toons, and I played *EverQuest* for five years. I'm a grandmother in RL and 63 years old, and you tell me *you're* old?! ROFL.

Diselle

Now the lamest reason ever for losing...



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Start

News, Previews, and Pert Opinion

XTRAS

Not only did we get the scoop on multiplayer, we also played the game for a couple hours. Go online to see what we thought of the experience, and stay tuned for Bill Roper on GFW Radio.

1UP NETWORK

INSIDE

PREVIEW
Mythos
This is only a test. How and why Flagship turned a test tool into a full-fledged game.

CULTURE
Aces Over Maddox
Get to know flight-simulation wizard Oleg Maddox.

HANDS ON
Team Fortress 2
Little changes add up to big drama in Valve's class-based multiplayer shooter.

HELLGATE: LONDON

Flying first class in an online game

PUBLISHER: **Namco Bandai/EA** DEVELOPER: **Flagship Studios** GENRE: **[insert new quasi-genre here]** RELEASE DATE: **Summer 2007**

Specialized hunters can create packs of killer droids for additional crowd-control support.

PREVIEW

"*Hellgate: London* isn't an MMO," Flagship Studios CEO Bill Roper says. "*But*, there is a paid service."

Wait a second. What's the deal with *Hellgate* hitting you up for a monthly fee? Isn't this one of the premier titles that Microsoft pimps for the Games for Windows initiative? Yep, but *Hellgate* isn't using Microsoft's Games for Windows Live service. Apparently, this requires a visual aid and a little more explanation. Roper grabs a marker, darting to the nearest whiteboard wall.

"Right out of the box, we wanted to give people everything they expected with *Diablo II*'s multiplayer experience. [Players want] to get online free, meet up, and go through the single-player campaign. That's really important to us," says Roper.

At the same time, another horde hounds Flagship's community boards, craving ongoing content, gangs of gamers remembering endless *Diablo* jags waiting for a new fix—addicts that even today retread the same cursed ground, thirsty for any hints of updates. "We just didn't have the manpower to create regular, new content back then. [*Diablo II*'s] 1.10 patch took one guy over a year and a half to build. We wanted to be able to provide the sort of regular updates people want today."

Flagship designed *Hellgate* to accommodate these two very different online needs. "MMOs tend to have multiple complex server structure requirements, and this was a driving factor behind our creation of [online hosting service] Ping0," says Roper. As for *Hellgate* not being on board with Microsoft's Live service, it all boils down to timing. According to Roper: "Ping0 was in operation and well under way before the Live Anywhere announcement. Since we never looked at the code or development tools for Live, I can't really comment on whether it would have been something that could work for us."

> "YOU WILL KNOW AN ELITE [PLAYER] WHEN HE WALKS BY...HE WILL STAND OUT IN A CROWD."
>
> –BILL ROPER, CEO, FLAGSHIP STUDIOS

TWO HELLGATES

Technically, Live could have been a natural fit, considering the scope of Flagship's plan—a two-tiered service. Drop 50 bucks for the box; you don't need to pay for anything else. Meet up with buddies and go through the single-player campaign online whenever you please. However, an "Elite" plan ("Let's just call it 'clvb 1337'," Roper jokes and scribbles on the board) starts you with the same out-of-box basics while adding a number of MMO-worthy features for $9.95 a month.

So, if it's not *exactly* an MMO, what are you buying into each month? Think of it like a flight. You buy the ticket and get to the same place, but two people can wind up with a slightly different experience. Where one guy casually saunters on the plane, sipping wine and chatting up supermodels, you're the poor schlub watching from the economy seats. Bastard! At least that's the logic behind the tiered system. The trick is finding that balance between providing values for each level and not leaving any consumers feeling short-changed. The best way to break this down is by showing what happens in-game. To that end, we played *Hellgate* on a test server.

THE GUIDED TOUR

Like in *Diablo II*, *Hellgate*'s single-player characters don't make the journey online. This prevents hacks that'd ultimately unbalance the online experience. It doesn't matter whether you're a paid-service member or not; Ping0 hosts your multiplayer characters. That also means that you're never landlocked to a single machine. Like in any MMO—or *Diablo II*, for that matter—you log online and your multiplayer character is always ready.

From the start, a few small differences intentionally separate pixelated patricians from the plebeians. Basic users get support and get online, but not like those flying Elite. The upper crust enjoys premium 24/7 customer support via online and phone. And god forbid you're stuck waiting in server queues to play—Elite users get ushered to the front of the line.

Once inside, you have three character slots. Want a little more variety for your online pantheon? Upgrading to the Elite account increases your stable to 12 slots. The same goes for your personal stash. Lockers scattered around the world allow basic users to stow about 20 items, while Elites can hoard over 40. In addition, an Elite player can share the stash between all his characters.

On we go, into demonic downtown London. Elite and basic players rub elbows in hub areas. >

Templars do all your gnarly gruntwork in *Hellgate: London*. Go hack and slash, you magnificent bastard!

Demons roam London's streets. Your job? Pop 'em all.

Both can chat (voice or text). Both have buddy lists. Both can trade in auction houses. Both can be in the same guild. But in the process, you also get to see how the other half lives. "You will know an Elite character when he walks by," says Roper. "He'll have on unique gear and will stand out in a crowd." More than that, only the Elite peddle powerful upper-echelon items and may e-mail such items to other "1337" players. Do you want to hop on the few working shuttles that shunt you to the far corners of the civilized world? Only if you flash your Elite member status. Also, the Elite multiplayer Freemasons can found and serve as officers in guilds. They are the only ones with access to player and guild housing. The basic players, reduced to guild flunkies and paupers, look in from the outside.

This is all window dressing to the actual demon slaying. Elite members have access to a wider variety of online gameplay types than the garden-variety gamer. It's more than simply dropping someone on a role-playing or PVP server. Upon character creation, Elite members select a game type and start mingling in the common areas.

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

More than likely, roleplayers will be able to join whatever groups they want to, but their default will be to interact with other roleplayers. This is especially critical since these gamers want the world and experience to remain "in character." On the off-chance a hardcore-mode player saunters through, clear a path—they don't mess around. If he dies, that character is toast. Game over.

Just because you're feeling 1337, that doesn't mean you need to pick a specific gameplay type. Roper explains, "Elite players can still party with non-Elites in content from the boxed game." However, if the Elite player decides to roll with a specific server/game type, then the game channels him into a grouping with similar players. Hardcore with other hardcore members, PVP squaring off against PVP and so on.

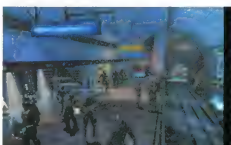
In addition, Roper promises a lot of ongoing content that won't be available to the basic player. Where some will hit the soft level cap somewhere between 35 and 40, fresh content will roll into the system on a monthly basis. If plans hold firm, 40 percent of the staff will crank new content around the clock, which amounts to either two small updates or one big update each month. On the list: new gameplay areas and quests, new higher-level demons, items, and even additional character classes that didn't make the cut for the basic game. More than that, PVP battlefields, Web access for characters—Roper points to many potential bonuses. Looking to other online games, Roper says, "We like how *City of Heroes* has these regular updates that add huge new gameplay elements and reward players that stick around."

Hellgate Handbook

Some handy travel tips

- **Can't use an item? Break it down into core components. These take up less space and could snag big bucks.**
- **Use all three weapon loadout slots. In hairy situations, you'll need to change tactics.**
- **Hunters: Some FPS-like moves—like the gunner's crouch skill—get mapped to the tool tray. As opposed to hitting "C."**

They may not call it an MMO, but it certainly sounds episodic. If Flagship can deliver new content on a regular basis and give the people what they want, someone will no doubt pay. Still, should Flagship be afraid that basic online players might raise an eyebrow at the Elite package upsell? Roper uses an analogy: "This kind of thing happens every day. I'm heading home from work and see some guy driving past in a Porsche. I don't get pissed about the car I'm driving, but I do wonder how I can get that other guy's car." That may be true, but what if you live in a neighborhood where most of the people have exotic rides and you're wheelman on a Camry? ● **Darren Gladstone**



OVER THERE...

Considering how different the Asian online markets are, what's the plan for charging foreign players? Bill Roper's take: "To meet the expectation from users, we are choosing business models that will be received the most reasonably in each market. We are discussing the sales model of our game with HanbitSoft and other related partners to yield the best strategy for each market." Translation: We aren't saying anything yet.

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abs

• While it may not be obvious, *Mythos*' point-and-click controls boast some nuance. Balancing and calibrating them is an ongoing process.

For now, the Flagship Seattle team makes do with 10 members.

MYTHOS

A peek into the past and present of Flagship's little big adventure

PUBLISHER: **Ping0** DEVELOPER: **Flagship Seattle** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **2007**

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

***Mythos* is a little game.** And a big game. And a lot like a game you may have heard of whose name rhymes with *Diablo II*.

Here's another thing those of you with tight fists might be interested to hear about *Mythos*: The game will be *fah-rhee*. It won't be sold at retail; instead, it'll be available as a $0.00 download from Flagship's servers. And it signals a larger trend: After years of big budgets and blockbuster mentalities, maybe, *just maybe*, the industry is finally coming back around to smaller teams, smaller budgets, and more personal productions. While *Mythos* is (at least at this point) strictly a PC game, it seems that the advent of download services on the console side (think: Xbox Live Arcade and Sony's PlayStation Network) is finally helping change the stagnant economics of the industry.

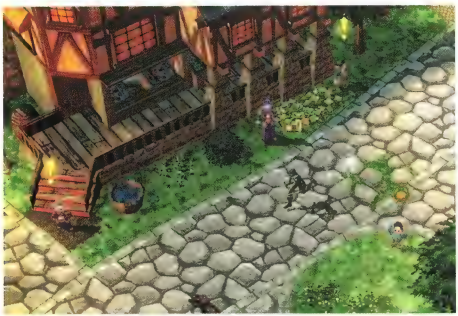
TOP DOWN

There's a long legacy of *Diablo*-style game craftsmanship at Flagship. For one thing, the company's cofounders are actually the original designers of *Diablo* and its sequel; in 2003, they split off from *Diablo* publisher Blizzard and started the new studio. And for another, *Mythos*' lead designer, Travis Baldree, is the creator of *Fate*, released by WildTangent in 2005—and arguably the most compelling *Diablo*-style game that isn't *Diablo*. How Baldree came to be involved with *Mythos* is an interesting story in itself.

The game actually began as a technical experiment, a way for the company to test the online stability of its, uh, "flagship" title, *Hellgate: London*. The concept was to create a smaller, more accessible game—with the same core technology—with which to test, tame, and tweak the crap out of *Hellgate*'s online component before it hits store shelves. Because *Mythos* shares the *Hellgate* engine, when the team fixes a bug in one game, it's fixed in the other. "Testing a server with 100,000 players is a lot different than testing with 10,000 players," says Max Schaefer, the game's executive producer. "And to be honest, we'd rather have our servers crash in a free casual game than in our huge worldwide release of *Hellgate*."

But back to Baldree. Impressed with his work on *Fate*, Flagship had previously attempted to woo him to move from Seattle to San Francisco to become a game designer on *Hellgate*. "After playing *Fate*, I immediately said, 'We should hire this guy!' I thought it was the closest in spirit to *Diablo* that a clone had come," recalls Dave Brevik, Flagship's cofounder and the original creator of *Diablo*. But despite all the wining and dining, it wasn't meant to be; Baldree and his family had happily settled in Seattle, and he reluctantly declined the offer. "So when the idea came up to do this test, we saw it as an opportunity to pitch Travis again—we thought we could make something bigger than a test," says creative director Phil Shenk. When Flagship came calling again, Baldree leapt at the opportunity, and for seven months holed up in his Seattle home and cranked on what would eventually become the foundation of *Mythos*.

What Baldree had to show went over well. So well, in fact, that the higher-ups at Flagship gave him the official go-ahead to assemble his own team and push forward with development on his little game. "As soon as we got something up and running, everyone was talking about how fun it was and how great it would be to work on," says Shenk. "And it was great to get into that style of game development again—quick and dirty, and you're just putting stuff up. It became something like our developer sandbox, where we get to try out cool new stuff." So Baldree called up a bunch of his game developer friends, and boom: Flagship Seattle was born.



"WE MADE [*MYTHOS*] IN LIKE SIX MONTHS, AT AN EXTREMELY LOW COST. IT'S A DESIGN SENSIBILITY OF FOCUSING ON THE IMPORTANT STUFF AND WORKING LEAN."

–TRAVIS BALDREE, LEAD DESIGNER

SECOND HAND OPTIONAL

"I just really like the casual, one-hand only, immediately accessible gameplay in that style of game," says Baldree as we saddle up behind a PC running *Mythos*' most recent alpha build. "I've been >

• **Using both dynamically generated and instanced dungeons, *Mythos* allows thousands of players to move within its world.**

• **"Even when Korean gamers play something like *Hellgate*, they want to pull the camera way back," says creative director Phil Shenk.**

trying out a lot of MMOs, and they all have a very 'metered' pace; you fight a monster, it takes a minute to defeat it, and then you move on. It's much slower, more strategic play. *Diablo* is more immediate. You don't fight one monster—you fight 30—and it's over quickly. [MMOs are] not action-oriented." While other online games seem to be sticking with "modal" combat—you're either in combat or you're out of combat—*Mythos* takes the "always on" approach. "I like the immediate gratification; my attention span is really short," continues Baldree. "I like to be able to play for like 20 minutes and feel like I've done a bunch of stuff, not just, you know, get a couple of extra crafting skill points." Sitting down to play the game fits Baldree's description, and within minutes, we're cruising through dungeons, slaying monsters by the dozen, and generally having a good, ass-whupping time. With one hand.

A "cuter *Diablo*" might be an easy way to introduce *Mythos*, but it's more than that beneath the surface. Most crucially, the game world was built to be extremely open-ended; content can be added virtually at will—or, at least, as quickly as the developers can create it. "If things go as we're hoping they do, it will be in continuous development for years to come," says Baldree. "We can just say, 'Let's add a whole new zone, let's add a new quest chain, let's add new character classes,' and we can do it. In a couple of years, we'd love to have dozens of classes and always be giving people new stuff to explore."

Rather than utilize a hyperspecific world map, *Mythos* is broken up into themed "zones." "That model enables us to do anything we want to," says Shenk. "We can add new tile sets, new dungeons, PVP dungeons, rare maps—unlike *World of WarCraft*, it's not a big, concrete world where you need to find space to put something." And detailed-obsessed curmudgeons can rest easy, because this is apparently going to be explained in the game's fiction. While the graphics engine is inherited from the comparatively hulking behemoth that is *Hellgate*, the art style is intentionally simpler. "Unlike [in] 'big' games, it doesn't take us two months from concept to completion to make one art asset. It really allows you to be nimble and try out new stuff all the time," says Baldree. "It lets us more easily make a fun game than making something that works as an Nvidia demo," echoes Schaefer. "All of these games are 1 percent inspiration and then 99 percent grind work.... So this turns it into, you know, 2 percent inspiration and 98 percent grind work."

BIG WORLD, LITTLE GAMES

Of course, there are now plenty of examples of financial success with casual games—particularly in Asia (where, it should be noted, Flagship expects *Mythos* to be huge). A tiny kart-racing game called *Crazyracing Kartrider* is said to have been played by over 25 percent of the South Korean population. Another Korean game, *MapleStory*, has nearly 60 million worldwide users, and a Java-based British MMORPG called *RuneScape* is—believe it or not—the second-most profitable subscription-based game in the West next to *WOW*. "The definition of what a casual game is is really starting to expand," says Baldree. "It was a big impetus for why I made *Fate*—I wanted to make a game that wasn't, you know, *Bejeweled*. And we made it in like six months, at an extremely low cost. It's a design sensibility of focusing on the important stuff and working lean." As mentioned earlier, the game will be free; the developer has said that it would like to monetize the property somehow, however, most likely by selling specific items for a small fee (though, as they're quick to point out, nothing that will affect gameplay balance).

So might the game actually be more fun than *Hellgate*? "It's a different kind of game," says Schaefer. "It'll be more fun to play when you're holding a piece of pizza, and there are some friends over, and you're talking with them. And who knows? It may have a bigger market than *Hellgate* because of that." • **Evan Shamoon**

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• ***Il-2 Sturmovik: 1946*** **(reviewed on pg. 76) provides a comprehensive aerial tour of Oleg Maddox's career.**

ACES OVER MADDOX

The *IL-2 Sturmovik* flight-sim whiz juggles planes, pains, and banged-up automobiles

Maddox's team gathers general info, blueprints, photographs—even museum photos—to render cockpits that can each take between two and four months to complete. "We snap everything at proper focus length and scale," says Maddox. "For a bomber with more than one player position, we take even more time."

PROFILE

You know Oleg Maddox...or do you? Flight-simulation wizard. Aviation anthologist. Virtual plane artisan nonpareil. If you've done more than dabble with Microsoft's perennial *Flight Simulator* games, you've probably logged hours with a Maddox sim, squinting over the dashes of tetchy Bf 109s and undergunned MiG-3s or brick-house Yak-9s and screaming Stukas. But did you also know this one-time honors graduate of Russia's prestigious Moscow Aviation Institute—who flew trainer and aerobatic planes and worked for the former U.S.S.R.'s top aerospace technology R&D bureau—was freakishly grounded two years ago?

It's one for the history books. On a typical Moscow Friday evening in late April 2005, Maddox was commuting home in his Škoda Superb—a sleek, Czech-manufactured safety bullet. Without warning, four vehicles in front of him snarled, affording Maddox only microseconds to brake and avoid a collision. Unfortunately, traffic behind him was less reflexive. Within seconds, two cars slammed into Maddox's tail like torpedoes, totaling his vehicle and snapping in two the seat frame that ultimately cushioned wrenching blows to his back and neck. Remarkably, Maddox sustained only minor injuries.

But in a cruel entropic twist, the very next morning while paused at a traffic light in a Škoda compact, Maddox was inexplicably struck again. Momentarily drowsing at the wheel, a night-shift garbage collector plowed his dump truck into the rear of Maddox's vehicle at a speed in excess of 55 miles per hour, mangling the compact and tearing ligaments in Maddox's neck. After a trip to the hospital, the man who resuscitated the flight-sim genre half a decade ago was collared with a neck cast for months, and thereafter forbidden from engaging in potentially neck-straining activity...like flying planes.

UP WE GO...

Today, eight years after announcing a Russian flight simulation too ambitious to possibly be real, and five after reality buckled with the November 2001 release of *IL-2 Sturmovik*—arguably the most authentic combat flight simulation ever—Maddox is finally thinking about flying again (and not in a simulator). "The doctors told me that my neck shouldn't be subjected to more than 1.5 Gs," says Maddox (most roller coasters pull around 3). He adds defiantly: "But soon, I'll start flying anyway."

Predictable rhetoric from a guy who, when he isn't spending time with his kids, counts skiing, diving, windsurfing, and snapping nationally recognized, award-winning underwater photographs among his seasoned hobbies. "I love boats," says Maddox. "The boat I have now I designed myself, built entirely from my own blueprints."

It's that do-it-yourself engineer's inclination that inspired Maddox to create one of the most beloved flight-simulation series in the history of the genre. *IL-2 Sturmovik* and its expansions comprise a World War II history buff's compendium of over 300 photo-real aircraft rendered down to the rivets, complemented by unparalleled physics and fastidiously researched milieus. To this day, you're apt to encounter thousands of *IL-2* regulars relentlessly dogfighting online or crowding chat rooms to boast about battles narrowly won.

Maddox attributes the series' longevity and that stable of supporters to good old-fashioned genre fidelity. "The core of a solid flight sim boils down to historical accuracy, sophisticated physics modeling, and detailed representation of all internal systems and armaments," he argues, singling out the PC market. "According to our own research and extensive polling, all the preflight bells and whistles like full-motion video and cut-scenes are only important to a very small number of fans. Flight sims that >

STORM OF WAR: BATTLE OF BRITAIN

Publisher: Ubisoft | Developer: 1C: Maddox Games | Genre: World War II Flight Simulation | Release Date: June 2007

PREVIEW

Goodbye, old friend *IL-2*—hello, new one. After six years on top, Maddox Games is ready to climb higher. Sporting an entirely new engine, *Storm of War* aims to become the backward compatible "everyman" series *IL-2* was, only better. The first installment—*Battle of Britain*—will offer players access to that infamous period between July and October 1940 when the British RAF attempted to stave off a massive aerial bombing campaign by the German Luftwaffe. But how do you mess up yourself?

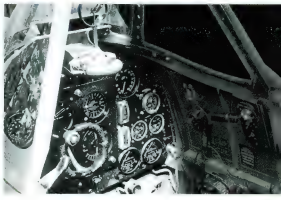
"For starters, we're modeling the complete internal structure of the aircraft," says Maddox. "Not just visually, but physically—including the actual plane materials and their physical properties. In short, our damage model will be vastly superior to IL-2's." The team's also rendering cities like London right down to the street-level traffic. Already, London double-decker buses follow their routes and pause at bus stops, while cars motor around and hunt for parking (oh: "We're not doing visual ground fidelity with pixelated aerial shots," explains Maddox, referencing other sims that trade pretty, high-in-the-sky panoramas for smeary blotches down low. "Instead, we're tiling a large number of special textures and reserving satellite data for elevation maps. So, for instance, the Cliffs of Dover will be precisely as tall as they are in real life."

Even avionics is getting a boost. Historically accurate ground-control radar will assist planes with target acquisition, and weather will shift dynamically during air battles. Imagine angry thunderheads on your six heralding deadly turbulence with air currents contingent upon altitude, terrain, and cloud motion.

After 2008, Maddox says the company's first priority will be releasing mid-size design tools allowing players to create their own gameplay maps and add their own planes, vehicles, and other objects. "After that, we may release an add-on with the Fw 190 and some British planes with the appropriate scenarios," adds Maddox. But don't look for full online anytime soon. "Letting fans access the core of a complex sim invites rampant multiplayer cheating," he says. "This is precisely why Microsoft's combat-sim franchise died while *IL-2* thrives. Our multiplayer is cheater-free."

• "For our core audience, the most important thing is how our planes fly," says Maddox. "Everything else is secondary."

• You'll need a joystick to play *Storm of War* as intended, but Maddox notes that the game may offer gamepad and mouse support for its easy mode. "Just remember," he says, "there's a reason why, 100 years after the first flight, planes still use sticks and pedals. A mouse or gamepad makes flying more complicated."



emphasize storylines over features don't stay on the market long."

He's got a point. Played any *Heroes of the Pacific*, *Blazing Angels*, or *Wings Over Europe: Cold War Gone Hot* lately? Even so, doesn't that make hardcore flight sims like *IL-2* the domain of curmudgeonly fogies with "assembly required" joysticks, keyboard overlays, and posh head-tracking gadgetry? Not at all, says Maddox. In fact, he argues, we should blame the "complexity" stigma on simulations that don't translate realism correctly. "In other flight sims, piloting simulated planes is actually much more complicated than flying real ones," he says. "The developers, frankly, knew little about what they were doing and concentrated on complexity for its own sake, assuming that making things difficult would somehow make them more realistic."

That's patently wrongheaded, says Maddox, suggesting the new trend in flight simulation is touting your simplicity, challenging the illusion that simulation and complexity are necessarily synonymous. "Unfortunately, you rarely see this mentioned in print, and most people are still unaware that flying a real plane is easy enough already," he says. "Older flight sims are largely to blame for making their audience believe that 'realism' means complicated, which isn't realistic at all."

INTERNATIONAL RATIONALE

Scan the *IL-2* boards, and you'll eventually stumble across customary quibbling over things like *IL-2*'s physics, fuel mixtures, elevation efficacy...and whether *IL-2*'s renditions reflect accurately—or with bias—the basic plane pizzazz of the game's numerous nationalities.

"It's not that we're doing something wrong; it's mainly the bias in postwar literature," defends Maddox. "Americans grow up reading that the Mustang was the world's best fighter. Russians grow up reading how the Soviet Air Force rolled over the Nazis. Then they run their games and get shot down in [American] P-51s or [Soviet] Yaks. Or the Germans go in and see that they can't score 352 kills in a row and that the Russians actually put up a fight and have decent planes."

Echoing Churchill's statement that "history is written by the victors," Maddox believes that descriptions of superior planes and pilots can be found in virtually every country's account of the war. "It's to be expected from memoirs written by aces who always fought and won. People read the books, start flying, and then when they don't perform as well as the aces, they blame it on the plane." That, of course, is just poor historical awareness, he says, adding that it's pilots who win dogfights, not airplane—simulation or no. "Even a superior plane can't beat a good tactical position before you enter the fight."

On the other hand, Maddox says that he and his design team welcome any scientific criticism supported by flight test data and period-specific technical publications. "Whenever we find direct proof that our modeling was not as precise as it could have been, we're eager to go back and make changes," he says, then adds, "Of course, our fans are the most demanding in the entire gaming world, and they'd like to have everything." And they probably wouldn't be sim fanatics if they didn't.

• **Matt Peckham**

ACCORDING TO MADDOX IT'S PILOTS WHO WIN DOGFIGHTS NOT AIRPLANES—SIMULATION OR NO

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"But, Mr. Freeloader!" you say. "You don't leave the house. How can you make any—ewww, I hope that's just a pizza-grease stain on your pajamas."

First, what the hell are you doing in my apartment? Second, *GFW* is finally ponying up some money for all my hard work avoiding work. I now officially have a four-alarm fire lit under my keister to find the finest freebies available—and I'm also gonna dedicate more time to digging up indie developers and give them the love that they deserve. But before we kick off the gratis gaming gala, I got me an axe to grind.

Recently, I mooched a copy of Windows Vista from *GFW* to see what the big fuss was all bout. I'll tell ya what it's about...it's about a world of headaches. A bunch of my favorite free games now refuse to work in Vista—still waiting for that "wow," Microsoft—so I've created my own home LAN security threat advisory system. A little harsh? Maybe, but I take my indie and free gaming very seriously. After all, I got me a habit to feed. All right, enough gabbing. On to the games! ● **The Freeloader**

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM

- **SEVERE** — The "game" crashes now
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- **GUARDED** — The "minor bugs" start now
- **LOW** — The "wow" starts now

XTRAS

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I didn't think I'd ever need one, but I just finished a tutorial on how to sneeze. Still, you have to go with the nasal flow in an action-puzzle game I found called *Gesundheit*.

The premise goes something like this: An allergic pig is the only defense against an army of cutesy-wootsy monsters. So long as you keep out of sight, you're safe. They see you, they eat you. So, of course, the only way to beat them is to lure them into traps. Aside from using yourself as bait, you have one awesome weapon at your disposal: boogers. No, seriously. Apparently, in Monsterlandia—or wherever the hell these things come from—folks have never supped on anything as scrumptious as pig snot.

Each area is a puzzle in which you try to figure out the best way to trap creatures. It's a sweet sampling of a unique art style and 12 levels of hocking loogies that lead cutesy monsters to certain doom. What, not enough?

I'm telling you, it's like someone started work on *Freeloader: The Game*...and quit after finishing the first section. All we need now is a burping minigame—and maybe a training area for avoiding bill collectors. >

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM | LOW

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THE GAME: **Falling Up**
FILE UNDER: **Racoon-bia**
GET IT AT: **www.acid-play.com/download/falling-up**

When, exactly, was the last time that I got dizzy from playing a videogame? Aside from mild nausea induced by playing *Postal 2* (I got it free from an ex-roommate and *still* feel ripped off—I want those three hours of my life back!), I can't recall. Then I started playing *Falling Up*.

It starts, simply, like any *Tetris* rip-off—I mean, "tribute." The familiar pieces drop at a steady pace, accompanied by the soothing sound of running water—but not soothing enough to inspire a full-bore sprint to the men's room.

Then, out of nowhere, the screen flips. Up is down. Down is up. Not *too* much to handle, right? But complete a few more lines, and the screen inverts, and suddenly left is right. And so it continues: Score a couple of more lines, and your senses continue to get scrambled while the screen continually flips. Five minutes more on this *Tetris* roller coaster, and I had a full-blown case of vertigo and still couldn't stop playing. Hang on...I'm not feeling...so well.... Excuse me for a minute.

VISTA ALERT: I couldn't get any game sound in Windows Vista. This may sound strange, but I actually miss that trickling water effect.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM ELEVATED

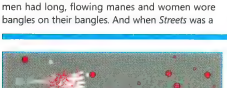
THE GAME: **Streets of Rage Remake**
FILE UNDER: **Hits of Fury**
GET IT AT: **www.bombergames.net/sorr.htm**

In the golden age of Cinemax (circa 1980), there was no such thing as a bad action movie—or softcore adult flick, now that I think about it. The original *Streets of Rage* for the Sega Genesis was a cheesoid tribute to those days gone by, when men had long, flowing manes and women wore bangles on their bangles. And when *Streets* was a button-mashing, side-scrolling, ass-kicking good time. This glorious 16-bit remake stitches together all three games from the classic series—and it looks true to the source material and plays well.

But I'm a huge fan of the tweaked-out soundtrack and the gang of extra features that give the game a lot of extra life. The unlockable modes and access to the entire *Streets of Rage* roster is nice—as is the two-player co-op mode. What? You think *Gears of War* (Xbox 360) is the only game in town that can handle A.I. buddy co-op? If you don't have a friend handy in *Streets*, just have the computer tag along on your beat-down delivery route.

VISTA ALERT: These streets are overrun with bugs! For some reason, *SORR* kept crashing in Vista. Run it in XP to play it safe.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM SEVERE



THE GAME: **ToJam Thing**
FILE UNDER: **For Those About to Rock**
GET IT AT: **www.queasygames.com/toJamThing**

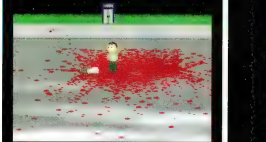
In sharp contrast to what I originally assumed *ToJam Thing* was about (seriously, you don't want to know where my mind goes), this innovative game—and its name—both came out of the 2006 Toronto Indie Game Development Jam. It's easy to wrap your head around the concept of this fast-paced shooter: You're a box. You inflate things. Pump slow, and they grow. Pump fast, and they pop. Ultimately, you rack up points by creating chain reactions. Use the arrow keys to move and WASD to blow stuff up—or use a gamepad.

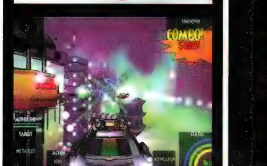
It may sound like a low-rent hybrid of *Dig Dug* and *Robotron*, but there's a lot more happening here. While you're busy pumping, a full guitar soundtrack rocks in the background. Unfortunately, your shots don't alter the music like the game creator's upcoming brainchild, *Everyday Shooter*. Lord knows that there are plenty of times I've wanted to create my own version of the classic "Pump Up the Jam" in game form. But I digress. *ToJam Thing* is a very stylish shooter, sure—my Technotronic dream will just have to wait for another day.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM LOW

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

It's not free—but it's close enough!





Yeah, it seems a little strange that, as the moochmaster general, I'm actually advocating dropping cash to support your gaming habit. I feel a little dirty even suggesting it. But every month as of right now, I'm gonna suggest good—and cheap—games made by some creative indie developers. It's OK to splurge every so often. Just don't make a habit of it.

The inaugural Indie Pick of the Month honor goes to James Silva (aka Ska Software) and the *Zombie Smashers X* series. A couple of years back, Silva released the original *ZSX*, which amounted to little more than a *River City Ransom*–ish button masher with ska and alterna kids beating the living crap out of the living dead. The sequel, *ZSX2: Punx and Skins*, felt more like punching and kicking your way through *The Toxic Avenger*—rocking more refined graphics and way-over-the-top humor, you dropped the hammer on zombies, Nazis, vampires, and robots.

Now, along comes the third game, *ZSX3: Ninjastarmageddon!*, which is more about over-the-top space privateering than anything else. You get to pilot a rocket-powered Gremlin hatchback—but honestly, you had me at *Ninjastarmageddon!*

Shareware demos of *ZSX2* and *ZSX3* are available at www.skasoftware.com (the full games will run you $19.81 apiece), and you can also download the original game that inspired it all, gratis. See how I did that? Plugged some indie games—and still managed to sneak in a freebie.

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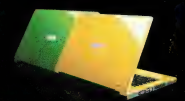

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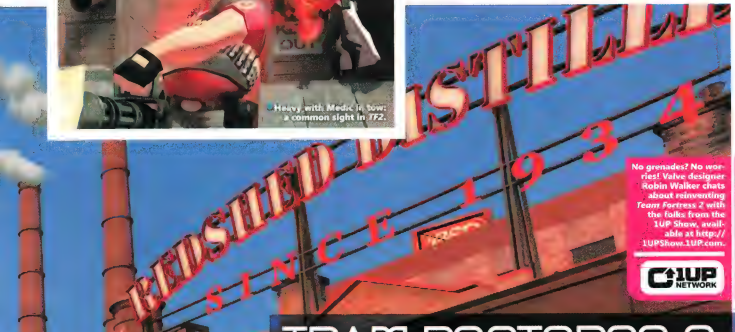
In lieu of grenades, Spies have a special device they can use on Engineers' sentry guns to put them out of commission.

GRENADES ARE GONE, LEAVING SUPPORT ROLES WITH FEWER OFFENSIVE OPTIONS.

Team Red's bases have a down-home farmer feel.

Heavy with Medic in tow: a common sight in *TF2*.



No grenades? No worries! Valve designer Robin Walker chats about reinventing *Team Fortress 2* with the folks from the 1UP Show, available at http://1UPSRow.1UP.com.

1UP NETWORK

TEAM FORTRESS 2

Valve sets its sights on class differentiation and stalemates

Valve Software/EA Games | Valve Software | Team Multiplayer FPS | 2007

HANDS-ON

Six or so blue-clad soldiers hang out in the locker room of Dustbowl, "inspired by" but not copied from the *Team Fortress Classic* map of the same name. They orient themselves, flick through and familiarize themselves with the three or four weapons at their disposal, and then hop back and forth into lockers and over other players, burning caffeine until the big doors roll back and the match begins. The timer ticks down to zero, the shutters slide open, and all hell breaks loose—a Scout goes down within the first second, maybe sniped by a sharpshootin' cowboy, maybe burned when he got too close to the stream of fire from the Pyro hiding 'round the corner. A Medic crouches behind a rock, staying out of harm's way while keeping line-of-sight on his linked Heavy ally so the stream of flowing crosses doesn't break—it heals the Heavy, and fills up a meter in the lower right-hand corner of the Medic's view that simply says "Charge." When the meter's full, that's the signal to hit his healing gun's alt-fire and grant both linked parties a few moments of invincibility; the pair's shimmering skin announces to the rest of Team Blue that it's time to push to the capture point. To clear the playing field of skittering Reds, the support classes without immediate jobs to do start lobbing grenades into the play field—wait, scratch that last part. In *Team Fortress 2*, there are no grenades.

TF2 designer Robin Walker reckons that of all the changes since *TFC*, "no frags" is bound to be the most controversial (though they're not gone entirely...the Demo Man still has his grenade launcher). Walker claims it's a bid to eliminate spam—less blind splash damage and unmanageable chaos—and sharpen the dividing line between classes. Gone, too, are class-specific secondary grenades, which leaves support roles like the Medic (who can no longer spread the plague, either) with fewer offensive options. And while I've never played a round of *TFC* in my life, I understand the point perfectly, just as I know why my priest in *World of WarCraft* doesn't come equipped with an area-effect fire blast. Walker's prepared for the message-board feeding frenzy; I've seen what happens when you try to nerf a druid. Gamers are all the same.

In a map called Hydro, Walker and his crew are trying something a little different. Realizing how natural it is for players to settle upon a simple handful of "favorite maps" to play ad nauseam, Walker says Hydro aims to at least make every replay a little something special. To that effect, red and blue teams can only bicker over two of the map's four control points at a time—at the beginning of a match, the game automatically chooses two adjacent or diagonal points (one red, one blue), and walls the players in, cutting off access to the others. Claim a point, and two new points are selected at random—not endless iteration by any means, but enough to keep the same map fresh, Walker hopes.

We push back and forth, but can't seem to make progress. Too many Medics (my stubborn self included), too many Spies—finesse over firepower throws everything out of whack. Time runs out, but instead of a *TFC*-style "time's up" anticlimax, sudden death is declared—last man standing, respawn no more. Another gamble to get rid of the "boring" that can come from a mismatched encounter. As I whip out my lonely little hypodermic-needle gun, I'm suddenly sorry I stuck with the Medic. ■ **Sean Molloy**

SPORE

Primordial pool as *Pac-Man*

PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **Maxis**
GENRE: **Simulation** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2007**

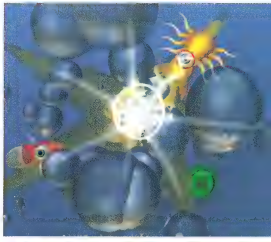
PREVIEW

Intelligent designer Will Wright's latest god game is goal-oriented in ways evolution isn't. Life through *Spore*'s eons describes a failure-proof climb from single cell to increasing complexity, from germ to cosmos-tripping intelligence. Not that *Spore*'s failure to simulate natural selection (a game where players would indirectly sculpt a critter by controlling its environment) is any kind of knock against it. Instead, evolution is a metaphor for the ever-marching sophistication of videogame design itself. As Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby write in *Smartbomb: The Quest for Art, Entertainment, and Big Bucks in the Videogame Revolution:* "The first stage in the tide pool, where the player must gobble up as much as possible without being eaten, mimics the gameplay of *Pacman* [*sic*]. The next stage of evolution is akin to a game like *Diablo*—a basic kill-or-be-killed scenario. The tribal part is Peter Molyneux's *Populous*; the city-building part is Will's own *SimCity*; the civilization-building part is Sid Meier's *Civilization*; and so on."

The primordial pool is *Pac-Man* in spirit. It's *Asteroids*, too, as game designer Chaim Gingold demonstrates in-game, breaking great big bubbles into smaller ones and chomping microbes bite-size. The better he eats, the bigger he grows. You could turn any of the charming creatures onscreen into vinyl statues and sell them in collectors' shops from L.A. to Tokyo.

Now and then, Gingold bumps into anatomical bits—flagella, water jets, and jaws—that go into his toolbox. Instead of buying T-shirts and sofas to clothe and furnish Sims, *Spore* players scavenge for one-size-fits-all Frankenstein parts to stick on characters. The interface is drag-and-drop intuitive and no mutation is disadvantageous. In other words, you can grow mouths on your life-form's flanks and, Darwin be damned, it'll feed itself just fine. The level ends when players find webbed feet and emerge onto land.

Biologically speaking, "good ideas" such as bacteria never go away. They continue on and coexist with genetically richer creatures in the way that *Bookworms* live side by side with *Zoo Tycoons*. Interestingly, *Spore*'s microcosm is purely past tense: no prolonging the phase as a viable survival strategy in and of itself; no living life as a parasite on the hide of your online neighbor's fire-wielder. When your gloop grows up and builds spaceships and seeds other planets with spores of its own, you will revisit it, just in the circular way that we "flipped" never-ending videogames back when. ● **Shawn Elliott**



● **In this, *Spore*'s first phase, appendages such as extra eyes are purely cosmetic. Think: survival of the coolest, quirkiest, and cutest.**

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RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 NERD RAGE

Filmmaker Kevin Rolfe is the original gamer you'll ever hear of, posting bizarre vids about console games in the guise of the 'Angry Video Game Nerd'. Check out Rolfe's Atari 2600 E.T. review at www.cinemassacre.com/2007/01/31/angry-video-game-nerd-et. Just make sure to cover the kids' ears first.

2 UO GANGSTA

Play *Ultima Online* the man's way—before all the carebear anti-PVP gameplay trampled the once-great granddaddy of MMOs. Britannia ex-pats at www.uogamers.com run an extraordinarily popular free *UO* shard called Hybrid, where players dissatisfied with the official *UO* servers' direction can party like it's still 1999.

3 THROUGH THE DARK PORTAL

The crack peddling sorcerers at Blizzard Entertainment gunned our gaze on the World of WarCraft Trading Card Game—"I'm to get the yuppie in game baby steppa'typh pat, and then become the PCG was actually really fun. Now we find out the first dynamic deck [Through the Dark Portal] contains a rare 'fortune-telling imp.' Son of a bitch.

4 EYES WIDE SHUT

Is it two squares and a bunch of circles? Or is it John and Lisa Willoughby-Keyes' struggle with their drug-addicted daughter, Lisa's return to veterinary school, and John's passive-aggressive behavior toward the inherited schnoodle? At the nexus of art, game, and pretentious claptrap: Rob Humble's *The Marriage* (www.rodvik.com/rodgames). Afterward, try the game about the divorce: *Pong*.

5 THEM!

Like those Godzilla movies starring some dude in a goofy rubber suit that decimates downtown Tokyo, *Earth Defense Force 2017* (Xbox 360) is a hidden gem. Bottom graphic glitches, wickedly awful voice acting, and funky controls strangely accent the fun. With giant space ants and huge cities to demolish, it may end up being the best $40 you'll spend this month.

6 CREATURE FEATURE

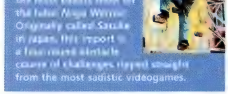
You thought that some of the mutato-mutts in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* were nuts? Try watching *Pan's Labyrinth*. Director Guillermo del Toro's creepy, cool, and twisted fantasy tale follows the young stepdaughter of a sadistic, fascist Spanish officer in 1944.

7 GUITAR HEROES

Cowboy guitar games with fat guitars! That's just bad stuff. You crave slimy-eyed girls' dialogue packed with rocking fresh-out-of-rock-jail phrases. For those who lack any musical ability, there's not hope (and a worldwide competition). The indie film *Air Guitar Nation* follows hopefuls through a national road trip culminating in one weird battle of the bands.

8 IN-VEST

We recently spotted some goofy gear straight off the set of a bad '80s Cinemax flick. Our favorite: TN Games is making a ForceWear "gaming vest" peripheral that pokes you when you get hit in a game. It's like having an annoying younger brother strapped to your back!



9 I, NINJA

Ninja Gaiden: Total ninja. G4 picked up the rights to the most badass show on the fake Ninja Warrior. Originally called Sasuke in Japan, this report is a four-round obstacle course of challenges ripped straight from the most sadistic videogames.

10 TOY BOX HEROES

This *Half-Life 2* total-conversion mod (www.toybox-heroes.com) comes from the students of The Guildhall at SMU. The point? Engage in a *Power Stone*–style 3D fight to determine the king of the sandbox. Is it the superheroic Bomb? Major Danger? Some sorta robot cow?!

PIPELINE

Save some cash for these upcoming games

MAY 2007	PUBLISHER
Alone in the Dark	Atari
Anarchy Online: Lost Eden	Funcom
CSI: Hard Evidence	Ubisoft
Earache Extreme Metal Racing	Metro3D
Halo 2	Microsoft
Haze	Ubisoft

Infernal	Eidos Interactive
Interstellar Marines	Zero Point Software
L.A. Street Racing	Groove Games
Marine Sharpshooter III	Groove Games
Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia	SouthPeak Games
Project Offset	Offset Software
Resident Evil 4	Ubisoft
Shadowrun	Microsoft
Soccer Fury	NCsoft
Spaceforce: Rogue Universe	JoWooD
Spider-Man 3	Activision
Surrender? "Nuts!"	Kudosoft
Theseis	track7

JUNE 2007	PUBLISHER
Call of Juarez	Ubisoft
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2	Ubisoft
Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	SOE
Rogue Warrior	Bethesda Softworks
Seven Kingdoms: Conquest	Enlight Software
Storm of War: Battle of Britain	Ubisoft
Tomb Raider: Anniversary	Eidos Interactive
Two Worlds	TopWare Interactive

SPRING/SUMMER 2007	PUBLISHER
Battleground Europe: World War II Online	Matrix Games
BioShock	2K Games
Dead Reefs	DreamCatcher
Huxley	Webzen
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men	Eidos Interactive
Madden NFL 08	EA Sports
Savage 2: A Tortured Soul	S2 Games
Stranglehold	Midway

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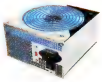

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LIVE OFF THE SET

Microsoft's games and entertainment network goes PC

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

THE BASICS

Private, peer-to-peer chat with friends comes free with Silver subs.

Live, as 6 million Xbox-based subscribers attest, offers unified friend lists, universal voice chat, quality control, and anticheat protection, along with access to "Achievements," virtual certificates awarded for completing in-game challenges. This March, Microsoft asked PC gamers to get with the online gaming network program.

MS reps say their reasoning is twofold: Connect Xbox 360 and PC gaming communities and enhance the online experience for PC gamers. Registered Xbox Live Gold members (see "The Basics," above) automatically receive Games for Windows Live privileges at no additional cost—input their existing gamertags, and off they go. Everyone else either signs up for the feature-light but free Silver package or pays a $49.95 annual premium for Gold. That is, of course, if they can be convinced to try it at all.

We ask Games for Windows and Xbox boss Peter Moore and Live general manager J.J. Richards about how they hope to sell gamers and gamemakers on the service.

GFW: Is this the first announcement in Microsoft history that hasn't included a single third-party publisher?

Peter Moore, corporate vice president, Interactive Entertainment Business, Entertainment and Devices Division: Well, I think we've probably made some other announcements that don't involve third-parties...as we've told all of the other third-parties, and I've been instrumental in this with third-party publishers, the complexity of what we're proposing to do with Games for Windows Live is something that my studios and Microsoft Game Studios are focused on first, learning some of the challenges, learning some of the obstacles to successful deployment of the service. We do have third-parties that are ready, standing by, but it's very much a first-party initiative first, and then third-parties will follow.

GFW: So you're saying that some third-party support is lined up?

PM: Not that I can announce. These are not things that you just turn on overnight and suddenly there'll be a game there. We have been very aggressive in laying out our entire program, initiative, and three-to-five-year strategy for this to all third-party publishers. I've been involved in most of those meetings on the road. And while nobody is in a position to make an announcement yet, there's a lot of activity.

GFW: Let's linger on that. If the third-party support is there, wouldn't it make more sense to wait until those partnerships are secured, then announce the whole program all at once?

PM: I want to drag you back up to 30,000 feet and the overall strategy behind this, which is building a broader community around gamers regardless of the device that they're playing on, [giving them] the ability to access Xbox Live whether they're at work, whether they're on the road, in their hotel room on their laptop, whether they're at home in front of their TV. We think that's as important as cross-platform play. So while having content that is both rich and deep is going to be important, and while cross-platform play is going to be very important, access to the community shouldn't be overlooked. When I talk to gamers, what they're excited about is being able to [access Live] 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whether they're at their office or whether they're in their hotel room or whether they're online in an airport.

GFW: As someone who subscribes to Xbox Live, getting Gold perks on PC is great. From the diehard PC player's perspective, it's different. On Xbox 360, you don't have other options; if you want to play *Gears of War* online, you get Live. PC players, however, have other options. So I'm wondering what is it about this particular option that makes it a must-have?

PM: Well, don't underestimate Achievements. You're right, though. If you're a hardcore PC gamer...you have to hang back and have a look. But we are giving you a choice, and we're opening up a world where you get access to the console community. A lot of existing Gold members are going to get better value out of their Gold membership, and I like to think that we'll also grow both Silver and Gold memberships because of the breadth of the device-agnostic gaming experience that we're now providing.

GFW: One developer says that, if he signs his game up for Games for Windows Live support, Microsoft's agreement blocks him from offering many Gold-tier features to nonsubscribers. So say, for example, that there's a *Battlefield 3*, and that it works with Live, that Gold users get voice-over-IP and can collect medals and all these other things that are already in *Battlefield 2*. Now we'd have to pay the premium for Gold accounts to access these features. The developer could no longer offer its own versions of voice-over-IP and stat tracking.

PM: I'll throw that back to somebody else to give you an answer. We'll get back to you on that.

GFW: He sees it as a hostile move. The words he used were "hijacking" and "hostage-taking." [*Moore laughs*] Yeah, yeah...hyperbole, but if that is the case, it would be a matter of suddenly having to subscribe to get what some people feel entitled to, to get what they're used to getting for free. I guess it's a matter of how much else you're offering....

PM: That's it, and the consumer will make that choice; the gamer will make that choice, and they'll see the value and subscribe, or not. Nobody is forcing anybody to do this. As the company that built the 360 and the company that's...reinvigorating the Games for Windows platform, we think that bringing the two platforms together as a very viable and powerful community, as well as offering some unique cross-platform play, is an opportunity that gamers want. Nobody under any circumstances is saying you must do this. You can still continue playing in the PC game environment that you like, and if the free environment's important to you, then have at it, great, we love people who play games on the PC. Because we're Microsoft, we'll continue to support that conditioning. Now, the concept that we debuted at [the Electronic Entertainment Expo] last year was, "Wouldn't it be great if we could somehow bring it all together?" We've deployed a tremendous amount of work, a tremendous amount of effort, and a tremendous amount of financial resources to make that happen, and we'll continue to invest in

"WE DO HAVE THIRD-PARTIES THAT ARE READY, STANDING BY."

–PETER MOORE

making that happen. I'm hoping that gamers will see the value when they look at what they get for their 50 bucks a year. But they may not, Shawn. You may be right, and they'll choose to continue to play using the services that are free, and God bless 'em. As long as it continues to be on a Windows PC, I don't think we have too many issues with that. A good example is what we do on the 360 with HD-DVD. Under no circumstances did we force high-def movie playback into the console. Rather, we gave you the opportunity to buy an HD-DVD player separately should you be fortunate enough to own an entertainment center at home that can take advantage of high definition.

GFW: Wouldn't Microsoft's antitrust agreement prevent you from saying, "In order to use DirectX 10, you must partner with Games for Windows?"

PM: We would never do that. The PC is still very much an open platform that we as a company, more than any other company in the world, have nurtured and made powerful. The Windows operating system has given birth to a PC on every desk, and gaming's a core part of that scenario. And you're right, not that we'd ever do that anyway, but we're also governed by a consent decree from the U.S. government regarding what we do and what we don't do. Having said that, we want to make sure that the PC continues to be a growing, open platform.

GFW: Wouldn't offering a full-featured Live for free—at least at first—improve Windows as a gaming platform? Wouldn't it entice third-parties, since they could then say, "We're adding extra content to our product, free of charge."

PM: Yeah, our business model is such that we have to be up-front with the consumer, that there's a very large cost to doing this and that cost needs to be recoupable in some way. I actually think it's disingenuous to start off free with a plan, and then charge for it. I think I'd rather be up-front with what we do, and we're doing that. Again, I made this statement when I met with you a couple of weeks ago: The $50 a year that people pay for Xbox Live Gold—I've yet to meet somebody that thought they weren't getting their value for $4 and whatever that is a month. If they don't believe they are getting their value for their money, then they'll simply opt out. No, I think it would be disingenuous to start off giving everything away for free if you had a plan to start ultimately charging. We are going to have a free 30-day trial that you typically get with the Xbox 360, so if you buy *Shadowrun* or *Halo 2*, you're gonna get that trial. I'm not sure we've announced that, but...if we do it for every Xbox game, why wouldn't we do it for our Games for Windows Live games?

GFW: Now, since you're splitting the service with Silver and Gold memberships, aren't these different degrees of entitlement...?

PM: The answer to the question I think you're trying to ask is that we really want to make people see the value of Gold. By allowing them to play, albeit not with a full feature set, until then, at least it gets them to play, and the challenge we would like to [accomplish] is to get people to step up, obviously.

GFW: Here's where that brain fart was headed: Will a Silver sub offer full VOIP? If not, you'll have split your player base between those who are able to communicate freely and those who are not. The people who are paying for Gold are gonna have people playing in their game who can't communicate....

PM: I think that they'll find friends. I make sure my friends have Gold if I want to have a full-featured competition. I'm assuming you don't go out there in the Wild West on a regular basis. You play with people you know and trust and have a good experience with.

GFW: On Xbox. On PC, I'm used to playing on public servers and, as you say, they are the Wild West, but because they're dedicated instead of peer-to-peer, they have administrators available that serve as sheriffs. I assume you'll still have server host options with Live....

PM: Oh, yeah. We're not trying to reinvent the multiplayer PC gaming environment. We're trying to enhance and give extra levels of choice. And I like to think that some of the things we've learned, albeit on consoles with Xbox Live, carry over here, particularly with [regard to] community. Achievements are probably the best example. People absolutely love them, and I can tell from your voice that you love them as well. We all do.

GFW: Achievements might be massive in an MMORPG. How hard is it to integrate MMORPGs into Live?

PM: From technical, community, and maintenance points of view, MMOs are very unique. They've grown the PC gaming platform, but on [Xbox] we've had a harder time getting powerful MMOs. You know we've got a deal with Marvel to bring an MMO to the 360—no announcements about how we extend that experience yet, but cracking the MMO market as a first-party...it's probably important, but there seems to be a steady stream of MMOs out now, in addition to the big daddy of them all.

That big daddy accounts for a disproportionate number of people who play on the platform. How much of a priority is it for you to court *World of WarCraft* and Blizzard?

PM: They're great guys. We talk to them on a regular basis; we love what they do, and I think the majority of people play [*World of WarCraft*] on Windows PCs. They've done a great deal to reinvigorate interest in deep and intense gaming on the platform. If your question pertains to console...PC is an open platform and MMOs work perfectly there when developers have complete access...to updating and patching the game, everything they need to do in order to keep things fresh and functioning 24 hours a day. It's a bit more complex on a console, the subscription-based model versus the packaged-goods model; everything else is different. Not to say that somebody won't crack the code for having a great MMO on a console....

GFW: Does certification slow or impede third-party developers from patching and providing new content?

PM: If you're a developer, no, you simply do that yourself.

GFW: So if you're branded as a Games for Windows game, and you're operating with GFW Live, you never need to have new content certified?

PM: If it's Games for Windows Live and there's some interaction with the console, then there's going to be some certification. But Games for Windows is not certified. There are basic technical requirements, but, no, not a laborious certification process.

GFW: One concern I've heard third-party developers voice is that certification is, in fact, part of Live, and that they then run into this conundrum...whether they can provide content free of charge [and] whether or not that content requires certification prior to release. So, to confirm, GFW Live won't work that way...?

PM: If the game is accessing Xbox Live, if, for instance, a console version of that game will interact with this fix, then yes, it has to be checked because you want to make sure what you're putting into Xbox Live is certifiable.

GFW: Such as *Shadowrun*?

PM: Yeah. If you change the code in some way, make a fix that may interact negatively with the service, then we need to look at it. If it's purely a Games for Windows game, which is separate from a Games for Windows Live game, then no, Microsoft doesn't certify that.

GFW: What if it's a Games for Windows Live game that works only on Windows? A hypothetical *Company of Heroes*, for example, in which case you're not playing with people on the console?

PM: I'd have to double-check. If it's utilizing Live, then I would double-check with our guys. Because you're asking me, now, certification questions that...I don't quite have the answer to. I think we would probably want to have a look at it if it was using the Live service.

GFW: Live Marketplace and Live Arcade are excellent on 360. Will Games for Windows Live offer equivalents?
PM: Ultimately, we need to extend the full Xbox Live experience onto Games for Windows. Crawl, walk, run. First we let you chase Achievements, create your profile, see where your friends are, send messages, and so on. Later, we'll follow up with everything everybody loves about the Xbox Live experience, things like Arcade and Marketplace. Video Marketplace, however, is a very complex situation with Hollywood studios and TV networks. We'd need to look at individual contracts...some studios could have obligations with other companies that utilize the PC for direct digital distribution.

GFW: Too early to talk specifics, though?
PM: We have a lot happening, but yeah, too early to make an announcement.

GFW: So far, only *Shadowrun* offers cross-platform play, right?
PM: *Uno*. It's one of the most popular games ever invented.

GFW: Which game?
PM: *Uno*!

GFW: Oh. *Uno*. What message does it send when *Halo 2* ships for Vista at roughly the same time that *Halo 3* debuts on Xbox 360?
PM: If the implication is that it's a negative message for the Games for Windows platform, then I'll disagree. Although it actually started off on the Mac, if I recall correctly, *Halo* has metamorphosed into a console game. It's been built and optimized to use a controller and Xbox Live. We have other games that focus purely on the Games for Windows platform, things like *Flight Sim* and *Age of Empires* and *Zoo Tycoon*. For better or worse, these things are the exclusive domain of the PC. So if the insinuation is that we should do everything we can to have them come out on the same platform at the same time, my answer to that would be—and you can agree or disagree—our focus needs to be on the console because that's where the game has the most impact for us at the moment. Other games are focused on the Games for Windows platform.

GFW: *Halo Wars* would make a strong Games for Windows game....
PM: Yeah, no announcements to that effect, but...I think our goal is to try [to] bring an RTS game to the console. That's what we said we're going to do, and that's what we're going to do. So the team at Ensemble is completely focused on the console experience right now. Obviously, bringing an RTS to the Windows platform is a no-brainer, but a lot of it is dev resources, a lot of it's strategic, and a lot of it's what we want to do.

GFW: Ensemble is one of your strongest first-party developers, especially for PC. Should its switch inspire confidence? Also, can you comment on what's happening with *Shadowrun* developer FASA Studio?
PM: In what respect?

GFW: Rumor has it that it's being disbanded once it completes the project.
PM: No comment on that. FASA is crunching now on *Shadowrun* and nobody's been let go.

GFW: Are you helping independent developers integrate Live services into games?
PM: Yeah, at their behest. We're a good evangelistic company and constantly get teams out to developers. If we think it's good that Live goes into a game, we're there.

GFW: *Crysis* could sell Live....
PM: Nothing to announce there yet. *Crysis* is a showcase title for the overall platform, but you need to keep a team focused on delivering what they need to do for the platform, and anything else that is different from the overall strategy when you're developing the game is going to be a distraction. Who's to say what's going to happen in the future, but one thing I've learned is that you can create trouble if you start changing paths during the development process. Our primary focus is delivering a game that'll show off Vista and DirectX 10 graphics.

GFW: How many people are working on Windows Live in comparison to Xbox Live?
PM: Internally at Microsoft? I don't know the number, but I think you'd be surprised by how [big] it is. For competitive reasons, we tend not to break down numbers of people working on projects.

GFW: I wanted to let you respond to Valve director of marketing Doug Lombardi, who argues that, "Right now, it seems that Games for Windows is part of a marketing push to help Vista. We'll see if in two years Microsoft is still spending money to put GFW sections in retail."
PM: We have an obligation to try [to] reinvigorate gaming on the PC. We're going to get behind this platform; we're going to put our money where our mouth is. We've now rolled out the Games for Windows branding in 9,000 stores in North America. We've put interactive displays in 1,000 stores—full demo units with monitor, keyboard, mouse—and that's been on our dime. To afford what I think is a great investment for the overall ecosystem, I've actually taken that marketing money away from my console marketing money. I ask for nothing back in return other than a healthier ecosystem than was there when we first started investing in this.

GFW: So the health of the gaming "ecosystem" is the ultimate goal?
PM: One of the things that most concerned me was that when I went to a retailer—and I was about to name one particularly sad example—I saw consistency on the console side, whether it was Xbox or PlayStation or Nintendo Wii. And I saw consistent branding, I saw DVD packaging that has the branding bar in the same place for all competitive platforms, I saw interactive displays on end-caps, and I saw an attractive place to shop. I then turned my attention to the PC aisle, and I saw productivity software, entertainment software, gaming software, different sizes, different shapes, different packaging, [inconsistencies] in look and feel, and it just wasn't as enticing a place to shop as the console area. I think shoppers tend to gravitate toward the other side. It's my goal to make it an enticing place for you to stop, pick up some packages, and such. We're making headway, certainly with the retailer and ultimately with the consumer.

Sci-fi fantasy shooter *Shadowrun* pits PC players against Xbox 360–owning opponents.

GFW: How much headway are you making?
PM: With a couple of exceptions, I think every major retailer of PC games understands and has embraced what we're doing. It's classic Microsoft crawl-walk-run. We're investing now—we're crawling, if you will—because we haven't rolled this out in the European market yet, which we'll do in the near future, and then we'll start walking a little bit as we get more and more publishers to carry the branding. And then I think people will see the power of what we can do on a global basis, and the entire ecosystem, the entire industry will be running with us.

GFW: Do you see EA and Ubisoft joining you?
PM: Yeah. My hope is that they can see the value. I think we all know the experience of walking into retailers where it's bright and enticing. We don't spend a lot of time or money in disorganized, poorly lit shops with an inconsistent look on the shelf. So Doug's going to have to give me some slack. But he's right—check back with me in two years.

"I MAKE SURE MY FRIENDS HAVE GOLD IF I WANT TO HAVE A FULL-FEATURED COMPETITION."
–PETER MOORE

"WE'RE NOT REMOVING ANY CHOICES. WE'RE ADDING A CHOICE THAT WE THINK IS A PREMIUM CHOICE."

–J.J. RICHARDS, GENERAL MANAGER, LIVE

PART II

JJ. Richards, general manager, Live: I want to talk you through the press release and its implications, since it was obvious that some people didn't understand it. This is the first bridge we've built that connects console gamers to the PC gamers. We have 6 million members connected to the Live service, and when we talk to them, [...] we ask them, "What do you guys want next...?"

GFW: How many of those 6 million are Gold subscribers?

JJR: The majority. We don't disclose specifics. So when we asked them what they wanted next—and 70 percent of them are dual gamers—they said to take the experience, the online community and Achievements and gamerscores, and extend it so that they stay connected when they get kicked off the living room TV and game at work on their PC, in their study on their PC, or in their bedroom on their PC. The idea is to expand that experience for those 6 million people, and for not a penny more. When they're playing *Shadowrun* or *Halo 2 Vista* or *Uno* this year, they'll enter their credentials for Live and play just like they would on 360.

GFW: Seventy percent of Xbox Live users you surveyed say they're also PC gamers?

JJR: Yes, console and PC. So we said OK, we want a value proposition for the dual gamer. Since we already have Live on [360], we just extend that feature set for the dual gamer and they're good to go. That's out of the gate.

GFW: Then there are those who aren't already signed on, and their question is, "What am I going to get out of this that justifies the fee?"

JJR: A better choice. We certainly didn't want to restrict any choices. What we want to do is add another choice to what's already available whenever you put in a PC game.

GFW: One question I put to Peter involved restricting choices. Imagine a *Battlefield 3*. It's on Games for Windows Live, it has voice-over-IP, stat tracking, and a promotion system. Now, is it true that, at that point, EA or whoever could not provide workarounds for people who purchased the software but not Live subscriptions?

JJR: Short answer to your question is no, if I heard it correctly. Let me walk through the specifics. Just like we're giving consumers choices, game developers are always going to have choices as well. They can create multiplayer play for Silver users. If they want matchmaking, if they want to take advantage of our zones and Achievements, they can add Gold. They're not restricted to one or the other.

GFW: Say they offer Silver and Gold through Live, as you say, but then they also want to provide stat tracking, matchmaking, medals, and VOIP to people *who do not subscribe to Live, period*. Can they?

JJR: Game developers are in complete control over what stats they have in-game. People who are not Gold, who are just Silver and are not paying anything, are able to access and earn every single-player Achievement. With multiplayer Achievements, that's where we got into it and asked, how do we make...these worth something? On the console side and also when we were going out and seeing what PC gamers wanted—they wanted something that was almost auditable or accredited, free from all the hacking and the cheating that's customary in PC games. What's a rank matter if you think everybody above you is hacking? So you want your rank to...I don't have a good word for it....

GFW: ...be based on merit, not exploitation?

JJR: You want confidence that it's against a common scale. So for some classes of Achievement, we had to figure out a way to create a common scale, and that's where Gold multiplayer Achievements come in. You have to be in the ranked matchmaking system to know that you're playing by the rules. So yes, a game could have ranking, and that's why I said your short answer is no, but they wouldn't throw in Gold-ranked match Achievements because they're not within that system. Does that make sense?

GFW: Yes. And voice-over-IP?

JJR: Silver supports private chat via text and voice; you can pull up any person on your friends list and chat with them. Developers are going to have a choice about how they're going to implement these things. The one thing that we're trying to emphasize is that this added choice that we're bringing is better than what's currently out there, and better means [getting] away from the griefing and cheating and hacking that you expect on PC. That's what the people on Xbox appreciate.

GFW: The reason I keep at this—and I apologize if it seems like a minor point—is that concerned developers argue that it comes down to saying, "If we go with GFW Live on this, and if you want to talk to all of your teammates in our game, you'll now need to subscribe to Gold to do so. Once we've agreed to work with Live, they won't let us offer workarounds."

JJR: That's what I'm trying to make clear—we're not removing any choices. We're adding a choice that we think is a premium choice.

GFW: OK, so then the answer would be, "No, that's not how it works, and their worries are unwarranted."

JJR: Yeah, but then I'm going to say let's wait and see what game developers decide to implement. Players want a better service than what's out there; they want to be matched with people who are the best match for them. Are you familiar with our gamer zones? So you can choose from zones for friends, for family, for recreational and competitive play.

GFW: That's a strong selling point: matchmaking and sorting players by skill. But for Live to truly become the best choice, it needs third-parties, it needs to offer these perks with *Crysis*, with *Company of Heroes*, with *Unreal Tournament 3*....

JJR: You're trying to get a scoop, aren't you?

GFW: I'll take the scoop, but I also think it's an important point. If Microsoft had third-party partnerships lined up with Live at the time of the announcement, your case would've been that much stronger, that much more convincing. It concerns me that that wasn't the case. There's going to be a great deal of resistance, depending on the developer. In this space specifically. On Xbox, Live is and always was the one and only option. That's not the case on PC, and it hasn't been the case for a long, long time. So, sure, while I'd love to be the first to tell everyone that they can look forward to all of this functionality with *Crysis* or *Unreal*, I also want to say that this will amount to more than *Uno*, *Shadowrun*, and *Halo*—that it's not over after that.

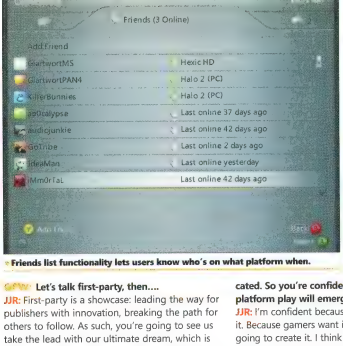
JJR: I hear what you want. I'm trying to figure out how I can increase your comfort level without disclosing specifics that we're not going to disclose yet. I know my wife's pissed at me now because I've gotta get on a Sunday morning flight to Europe to talk to someone next week. And our teams are talking to other third-party developers about error codes, but I can't give you any title announcements.

GFW: Is it safe to say you'll announce some significant third-party partnerships by the end of the year?

JJR: You've seen how we work in the past: At every major event, we add a new piece. So we've got our PR folks, and they've got their own ideas as far as when and how to release information. I don't do that, so all I know is that the work's happening, the titles are coming, and we're going to announce them when we announce them. I think they'll be pretty impressive announcements, when we do [release the announcements]. Again, look at this press release; we could have just left it at the tiers and pricing, but we threw in *Halo 2 Vista*, a pretty big title, *Shadowrun*, a pretty big title, and for our casual gamers, *Uno* cross-platform, a pretty big title. When we bring out something new, it's going to get its own bright, shiny announcement and its own press release. [It's] not [going to be] buried as a fourth title in this list.

GFW: Do you think that it's a chicken-and-egg scenario, where GFW Live needs third-parties in order to thrive, but, conversely, Live needs to succeed first in order to attract third-parties?

JJR: I don't understand the question. The community is about gamers, and the gamers only come for the games, and the community that we build is a community around games.



Friends list functionality lets users know who's on what platform when.

***Halo 2 Vista* features Live Achievements and a map editor.**

GFW: Let's talk first-party, then....

JJR: First-party is a showcase: leading the way for publishers with innovation, breaking the path for others to follow. As such, you're going to see us take the lead with our ultimate dream, which is for developers to write once and publish twice. That's where we want to go. Nobody wants to fund different development teams to create the same game for different platforms, and this way they can focus on innovative gameplay, storylines, and art. What I'm excited about is when people start to think about types of cross-platform gameplay—not one player with a mouse versus another player with a gamepad, but breaking it up....

GFW: In a perfect world, what types of interactivity would we expect to see developers introduce across the two platforms?

JJR: *Halo 2 Vista*'s map editor is a great example of augmenting the experience on the PC.

GFW: Are the console players then able to benefit from map editing performed on the PC?

JJR: For *Halo 2 Vista*, the answer's no....

GFW: Because I'm talking about cross-platform, where the two are actually working with one another.

JJR: If we weren't making *Halo 3*, we'd probably have the resources to take *Halo 2* on Xbox and upgrade it to the same next-generation experience that *Halo 2 Vista* is going to be. You have to remember, this is going to be the first time ever that *Halo* Nation gets to earn Achievements in *Halo*. You can't do that in *Halo 2* on console, you can't create maps....

GFW: Again, I can see how that could be huge when you're talking about making Windows more attractive to people who are already part of the Xbox Live community, but it's not like this is the first game that's ever let you manipulate the multiplayer playspace on PC.

JJR: Do you play *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*? Part of the game is played from first-person perspective; you shoot, seek cover, shoot. And then there's the tactical overlay, where you control a drone that provides intelligence to soldiers in the field. Imagine that, but where the person on the PC can bring more of an RTS mindset to it, or a *Command & Conquer* approach, while people who are on the PC or the console can take on the foot-soldier roles.

GFW: Sure, I'm thinking along the lines of commander mode in *Battlefield*, but more complicated. So you're confident that this sort of cross-platform play will emerge on Live?

JJR: I'm confident because I think gamers want it. Because gamers want it, I think developers are going to create it. I think developers are going to create it because we're providing the infrastructure and the platform for them to do so.

GFW: At one point, people speculated that *Halo 3* would work this way.

JJR: Yeah. And again, if your readers keep clamoring for it, it's going to get built. The infrastructure is there. Developers and publishers don't have to worry about the how now; the how is done, so they can just focus on that gameplay, the storyline, the unique experiences. That's what we're hoping will happen here.

GFW: We were surprised when Ensemble announced that it would develop *Halo Wars* for 360. The studio is such a strong asset for Games for Windows. Are you still putting top internal developers on Vista projects?

JJR: Absolutely. Again, we're executing with the vision of write once, publish twice, and this is absolutely part of all of our future plans. From here on out, we approach everything in a cross-platform way. We even have to think about how retail works. When you walk into a store and you want to buy a Gold membership card or Microsoft points, what do we put on the package?

GFW: What can a Gold subscriber expect by the end of the year? Two, three years from now?

JJR: The world's biggest social network built around gaming? Being able to chat with friends no matter what they're doing, watching videos, or TV, listening to music, or playing games.

GFW: Another question that Peter wasn't able to answer at the time had to do with certification and how it pertains to patches and additional content. Let's say your MMO works with Games for Windows Live. You need to patch it, pronto, or perhaps you want to add content. Would you need certification?

JJR: I remember reading your magazine in the last couple of months, and you loved a high-profile game but dinged its rating because it shipped with some bugs. If you want to talk about this, that's probably a good example. The point of us working on stuff is to stop that from happening. Which way do you want it? Do you not want us there, so you have the bugs, or do you want us there, so you don't have the bugs?

GFW: So that's an indirect yes, right? That you would need to certify patches and other such content?

JJR: If you're taking advantage of the Games for Windows Live network, then yeah, because we're not gonna have a game go up that breaks the matchmaking service, or violates the way our security measures work. Go back to Achievements, for example. The first thing we ask is did they give 100 or 1,000 or 10,000 gamer points? Somebody needs to check and confirm that, yes, they gave 1,000 like they were supposed to. Not too many, not too few. We make sure that multiplayer matchmaking and Achievements and everything else works, and that's to avoid the problems you guys cited.

GFW: That makes sense. What about requiring third-party developers to charge for content that they might prefer to offer free of charge?

JJR: Developers are still in control, on the console as well as on PC. They choose what to do.

GFW: Epic is another story with *Gears of War*, but if they said, "We don't want to charge for whatever content we're doing," would that be their decision to make?

JJR: I think developers determine what to make and how to make it. If they wanted to use PayPal in Live Marketplace, we're going to say, "Guys, we're using Microsoft points."

GFW: I'm talking entirely free. No points, no payments.

JJR: We're certainly not forcing anybody to do anything.

GFW: Gotcha. Final question: If, say, *Shadowrun* doesn't succeed to the degree that you had anticipated on either platform, will you still pursue cross-platform play to the same extent that you're planning on now?

JJR: Yeah, I think so, because again, gamers want it. Gamers want to play with their friends, whether or not they're on the same platform. They want to follow up the smack talk on who's better, and they want to be a part of the biggest community possible. I don't see any of those things going away. We're not doing this because we think it's a good idea, we're doing this because we've talked to thousands of gamers around the world and asked them what they wanted next, and this is what they told us they wanted. And that's what we've built.

COVER FEATURE

Ask Blizzard's humble loremaster Chris Metzen how he feels about the Sin'dorei enslavement of the Naaru, the narrative repercussions of killing an Old God every few content patches, or what nutty wonders lie beyond the gates of Uldum, and he'll talk one ear off and half of the other. Ask him about how he feels about gold-farming sweatshops, college dropout rates as a function of MMO adoption, or kids dying from overplaying Pallies in Korean Internet cafes, and he's left speechless.

What happens when your game gets bigger than you are? When it takes on a life of its own and becomes something far greater than what you ever imagined? We spent a day at Blizzard trying to find out—only to discover that they had just as many questions as we did.

CHANNELING HURRICANE

Irvine, CA. 10 a.m., March 30, 2007. It's quiet, sunny, and warm in the suburban office-park parking lot. Birds chirp, men on cell phones synergize and rightsize, and you'd never guess that the company behind the sterile facade on the left sits at the center of an 8.5-million-subscriber maelstrom. Over the course of the past 30-odd months, Metzen and his cohorts have watched Blizzard Entertainment transform from "beloved gamemaker" into "certifiable cultural phenomenon," its hit *World of WarCraft* inspiring everything from *South Park* episodes to 11-o'clock-news alerts about the dangers of late-night raiding. Some say it's only a game. The bulletproof glass shielding Blizzard's receptionist says otherwise.

But the folks at Blizzard are taking their surprising status as a social force (have no illusions: The number of *WOW* subscribers tops the population of the state of Georgia; in China, where "Internet addicts" are treated with shock therapy at special clinics, it's estimated that 630,000 people are playing simultaneously every evening) in stride—not because they don't care, but because it's the only way they know how to deal. "It's still kinda beyond us," says Metzen, a *Dungeons & Dragons* geek in a pro wrestler's body, who—when it gets down to it—really just wants to spin Weis and Hickman fables about dragons, Orcs, and Trolls. "It's really hard to get your head around that number. I don't even know what it is." >

IN THE THE ST

EYE OF ORM

How Blizzard survives at the center of *World of WarCraft*

BY SEAN MOLLOY

A couple of other numbers: At the beginning of 2004, Blizzard consisted of a few hundred employees; today, the company has approximately 2,500 workers around the world—all because of *WOW*. Paul Sams, chief operating officer and 13-year Blizzard veteran, has been there essentially since the beginning—and has watched the company grow from small-time crafter of quirky platform-puzzler (*The Lost Vikings*) to genre-defining barrier-buster (*StarCraft*, which Sams says he loves "like no game ever") to what it is today. Growth inevitably brings change.

"Things that have stayed the same?" offers Sams. "Our core focus and goal, and that's to make the best games in the world. That has absolutely been unchanged.... Things that have changed, from my perspective? I don't know every single detail of everything we do anymore. I think the old brain isn't able to have as many things in it as there are things going on."

"My brain's not big enough, not at all," echoes Metzen. "Just to see this thing living and growing—it's like a kid, and it's really starting to walk. Well, it's been walking for a while, but it's starting to pick out its own clothes, it's starting to speak. It's really got a life of its own."

As we stroll through Blizzard's office, we get the impression that everything is on parental lockdown as *WOW* rampages through its terrible twos—turn the pot handles in, shove plastic guards in the outlets, and lock up the forks. Don't photograph this, don't talk about that, don't even *think* about asking about the mid-May mystery announcement in Korea. Seemingly innocent questions like "What classes do you folks play?" are shot down for fear that the information will spread like poison—as if the knowledge that lead designer Jeff Kaplan's main is a Druid (it's not...*or is it?*) will result in the collapse of the Internet. It probably would.

EVERSONG ONE

Designers, artists, and programmers less like cogs in a machine than cells in an organism, contributing to a whole no single unit is able to really comprehend or control—at Blizzard, ideas don't flow in a chain so much as through a circulatory system. Cinematics inform texture artists and level designers, concept artists shape lore, and a single song can shape an entire quest chain.

"It's not just story," says Metzen. "It's when the story starts informing the unit design, when it starts informing costumes—when you click on units and they say stupid s***, like...what does [Troll exclamation] 'tazdingo' mean? I don't know. But all this then reverse-informs the story. It's very organic."

Downstairs, in Blizzard's sound department, audio director Russell Brower offers up the perfect paradigm of Metzen's functional metaphor.

"Are you familiar with the song we did?" asks Brower, referring to one of *The Burning Crusade*'s most talked-about quest chains: The Lady's Necklace, a Blood Elf newbie mission that culminates with Lady Sylvanas Windrunner, undead Banshee Queen of the Undercity, pausing to sing a song—complete with lyrics in Thalassian (language of the Blood Elves) and summoned spiritual choir.

"I'll cop that it was not something we planned from the beginning," says Brower. "As I was writing the music for the Blood Elf starting area, I felt that some of the melodies were becoming kind of lyrical... They were taking song form. And of course, we're all fans of the *Lord of the Rings* films, and they took some of Tolkien's poems and set them to music and had Annie Lennox or Enya or whoever sing them, so I started to think, 'Hm, this is kind of an opportunity here.'... It was just called 'Eversong One,' and when the soloist sang the song, we weren't prepared for it, it was so moving. What you hear is take one; she was sight-reading it. After it was over, I played it for Chris Metzen, and he said, 'This is called "The Lament of the Highborne," and Sylvannas is singing it, and I'll tell you why.' He checked with me on the translation—we tweaked some words here and there—and >

(continued on pg. 55)

GEEK LANDMARKS

? You've got your favorite quest, zone, or instance—so do the folks at Blizzard. Look for the question marks.

! The exclamation points mark Easter eggs and other points of interest across Azeroth and Outland.

? FAVORITE CHARACTER?

"Anduin Wrynn, King of Stormwind. He might seem like an odd choice since I mainly play Horde and he can't even be attacked, but he's my favorite for one simple reason: fatherly pride. The voice you hear when you talk to Anduin is my youngest son, Joey, who was 11 at the time." —John Cash, Technical Director

? FAVORITE CHARACTER?

"Old Blanchy. No explanation is needed. Most epic character ever. Move over, Tolkien." —Jeff Kaplan, Lead Game Designer

? FAVORITE ZONE?

"In the old world, Westfall...it's the first one I ever worked on and I have a soft spot for it." —Jeff Kaplan, Lead Game Designer

? FAVORITE QUEST LINE?

"Probably the Defias Brotherhood quests that eventually lead to the Deadmines. There's just an overwhelming Alfonzo Bonasterry feel that comes to the surface. You start off just a few minutes into the game taking out your first Defias Thief near an abandoned shed in Northshire, and later you find yourself surrounded with other players trying to stop the plans of a madman in charge of an entire secret society whose base of operations is upon a Horde Juggernaut currently being built in an underground dock...epic stuff." —Justin Thavirat, Art Director

• Basically a film studio: "The [two-and-a-half minute] *Burning Crusade* intro probably took us about six months," says cinematics executive producer Matthew Samia.

FAVORITE BOSS?

"Ragnaros…it's awesome watching him one-shot Majordomo Executus, whom it took 40 of us to kill. The whole encounter just has a really epic feel. My favorite screenshot is a perfectly framed shot of me staring up at Ragnaros, the bodies of the rest of the raid all around me, and him just about to smack me down." —*Jeremy Wood, Senior Software Engineer*

FAVORITE RAID ZONE?

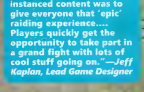
"Naxxramas. We poured our hearts and souls into making this zone. We worked on it for over a year…everything just sort of came together in Naxxramas. Plus, I love the Tim Burton vibe." —*Jeff Kaplan, Lead Game Designer*

FAVORITE 5-MAN DUNGEON?

"Stratholme undead. The lore does not get any better than this, in my opinion. Great atmosphere, undead everywhere, and a great end fight with Baron Rivendare." —*Cory Stockton, Lead Level Designer*

FAVORITE BOSS?

"I still think the Archaedas encounter in Uldaman is one of the best dungeon bosses in the game. One of our goals in creating five-person instanced content was to give everyone that 'epic' raiding experience…. Players quickly get the opportunity to take part in a grand fight with lots of cool stuff going on." —*Jeff Kaplan, Lead Game Designer*



FAVORITE ZONE?

"Artistically, Duskwood. After working on Elwynn and Westfall, it was fun trying to come up with the ultimate 'haunted forest.' It's memorable to cross the bridge for the first time and feel the hazy bluish fog roll in, see the cobwebs swaying from the trees, and notice the blinking eyes of some creature peering from the shadows." —*Justin Thavirat, Art Director*

FAVORITE RAID?

"The first one I ever went to: Zul'Gurub. The first time we went in there, I think it took us an hour and a half just to get to a boss. We had no clue what we were doing; it was great! But we slowly learned how to work as a raid, and when we started taking down bosses, it was a freing wave of an had yet experienced in the game." —*Jeremy Wood, Senior Software Engineer*

SWORD OF A THOUSAND TRUTHS

You know you've hit the big time when you're parodied by *South Park*. Some things you didn't know about the episode "Make Love, Not WarCraft," Part "Pre" on the *Burning Crusade* alpha test server:

1. Despite their appearance, both Cartman's and Kenny's characters were actually rogues.
2. Unofficial *WOW* mascot Murky made it into two frames of one of the shots near Gahlrin.
3. Jenkins, the PR guy villain (above), was modeled after a Blizzard employee who helped with production. Poor guy.
4. After being teleported off "stage" several times by Blizzard, a curious warlock sent in an Eye of Kilrogg.

CHARACTER SHEET

Meet the Players

While *World of WarCraft* is built on QA testers and character modelers, quest writers and internal raid team members, a few "key players" have been integral to *WOW*'s success—though no single person listed on the right side of this page probably wants to be singled out as such. Think of them as your humble civil servants.

"*World of WarCraft* is very much like running a large city," says lead producer Shane Dabiri ("large" being an understatement; the population of New York City is just over 8 million—and just shy of the number of *WOW* subscribers). "The development team is the public works and city officials. The mayor can't very well make good decisions about the city if he or she doesn't live in it...so we play in it."

And not just for professional reasons—most of the Blizzard folks have "playing with mom and pop" stories similar to our own: "My nephew plays," says senior vice president of product development Frank Pearce. "Plenty of my friends play. In fact, I was able to reunite with some old high school friends through *WOW*."

"We have people here who have kids away at college," says chief operating officer Paul Sams, "and they play with them at night. One of our real-estate guys was telling me he was having issues with his 18-year-old son, and they connected through *WOW*."

Tom Chilton
LEAD GAME DESIGNER
Hailing from Britannia (*i.e.*, he once worked on *Ultima Online*), Tom is the de facto *World of WarCraft* PVP guru. Got ganked? Cry to him. He's probably laughing at you.

Shane Dabiri
LEAD PRODUCER
One man's head can't contain the entirety of *WOW*—but that's this man's job, tasked with making sure the *WOW* development horde stays "on the same page."

Jeff Kaplan
LEAD GAME DESIGNER
Ushered into the *World of WarCraft* fold by his former *EverQuest* guildmaster Rob Pardo, Jeff epitomizes the "gamers making games" philosophy.

Chris Metzen
VP, CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT
Wordsmith, taleswapper, and lorekeeper of the *World*. Don't ask him about tier 6 set bonuses—but you can ask him about the item names.

Mike Morhaime
PRESIDENT
Founding co-father of Blizzard (alongside Allen Adham and Frank Pearce). He's been high (*StarCraft*, *WOW*); he's been low (*WarCraft Adventures*, *StarCraft Ghost*).

Rob Pardo
VP OF GAME DESIGN
He didn't just shape the world of *WarCraft*. Pardo is the sole game designer on *Time* magazine's 2006 list of "100 People Who Shape Our World."

Paul Sams
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER
Sams has been with Blizzard 13 years (and counting), and has helped the company grow into a global powerhouse.

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THE ALIEN ENIGMA

"We weren't sure about the Draenei," says VP of game design Rob Pardo. "They're definitely more out of left field, more alien. Outland itself has that vibe. We weren't sure how well that would go over, but people seem to have really liked the Draenei a lot."

FAVORITE 5-MAN?

"Dire Maul. Because of the winged design, we were able to experience all the content it had to offer in shorter play sessions. As a result, the pace felt very fast compared to some of the other dungeons. We would often do tribute runs at lunchtime."—*Frank Pearce, Senior Vice President, Product Development*

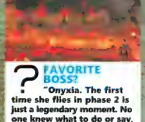
NOT FORGOTTEN

Blizzard still plans to go back to the "old world" and finish what it started. You can still expect to see the likes of Grim Batol, Uldum, and Hyjal (the latter of which crafty players could at one time sneak their way into for an under-construction sneak peek at Archimonde's corpse).

ELF'S BEST FRIEND

Off the coast of Azshara lives a demon hunter NPC (Loramus Thalipedes) and three felhounds—Shahiar, Zaman, and Rayta'af—who are named after one of the quest designer's friends.

KALIMDOR

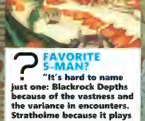


FAVORITE BOSS?

"Onyxia. The first time she flies in phase 2 is just a legendary moment. No one knew what to do or say, it was just awesome."—*Cory Stockton, Lead Level Designer*

FAVORITE BOSS?

"C'Thun in the Ruins of Ahn'Qiraj is by far my favorite raid encounter…. From a raider's standpoint, this was a fight that kicked aside the standard 'tank and spank' battles of the old design paradigm and punched raiding into overdrive. Everyone had a job that brought out the most enjoyable aspects of his or her class. Mobility and reaction time were an absolute requirement, as was situational awareness. Above all, though, was the amount of teamwork required to defeat this Old God. When the raid was working at peak efficiency, you could feel electricity on the battle field."—*Alex Afrasiabi, Game Designer*



FAVORITE 5-MAN?

"It's hard to name just one: Blackrock Depths because of the vastness and the variance in encounters. Stratholme because it plays really well and has some great moments. Caverns of Time: Black Morass because of the challenge and pacing; Caverns of Time: Old Hillsbrad is pretty awesome too."—*Jeff Kaplan, Lead Game Designer*

pretty soon, he's on the line to Jeff Kaplan's team and they're redesigning an existing quest. In the old version, you return the pendant, she throws it down, and that's the end of it. Now she picks it up and starts reflecting on it—it'd always been a song lamenting something, the plight of various Elven races. Starting with the beta, players were just beside themselves, and I was so happy—'cause I love phat loot and epic armor as much as the next guy, but to have a quest reward be more story and a song—that's cool, and I think it bodes well for some really neat stuff we could do in the future.

"That's what I love about this place.... I used to work for Disney Imagineering, and there was always a real solid backstory for the best stuff. I really try to bring that with me wherever I go—or I seek that out where I would like to work."

ANGULAR MOMENTUM

"Hire gamers" has long been a Blizzard mantra. Vice president of game design Rob Pardo has been both beneficiary and benefactor of this philosophy, pulling double duty as *EverQuest* überguild leader (his guild Legacy of Steel was responsible for numerous "world first kills" in *EverQuest*'s raid game) and *Diablo II* and *WarCraft III* designer, ushering his Legacy of Steel successor Jeff Kaplan into the *WOW* fold. Success breeds success—more players means more potential star designers and artists; a better game means more players.

Pardo and company are bombarded with guild leaders and raiders looking for jobs—their forum posts and guild webpages often serving (at least in their minds) as résumés, "proof" they know their loot tables and aggro lists. But "blogs or websites are a double-edged sword," says Pardo. "I get a lot more insight into the way you think, which can be good or bad for your possibilities of getting a job.... People hang themselves with their opinions and what they're critical of."

Every employee we encounter, from PR manager to clock-tower texturer, plays the game on their free time. At lunch, conversation quickly turns to arena-team makeups, and how successful Feral Druid/Fury Warrior combos can be. Over drinks, level designers cop to hot-fixing spawn times in an instance after their own guild ran it over the weekend and found 'em to be—well, kinda annoying. "Jeff [Kaplan] comes into my office most mornings, and we'll just talk about the game," says Pardo. "What quests we've done, we should change this, we should change that."

"I haven't played *Gears of War*," says Metzen, "or *God of War II*. I know they're genius...but I keep dicking around with this game, seven years later. It doesn't matter that I had something to do with it. Every time I jump in, I'm just a dude."

MID-MORTEM

Blizzard are usually their own worst critics. With too-high raid caps, broken honor systems, and useless meeting stones behind them, we ask "what's still wrong?"—and they struggle to find an answer. "I think we did a B-plus job with itemization," says Pardo. "It's half science and half art. One of the reasons why a lot of people complain about dungeon drops in *Burning Crusade* isn't because the dungeon drops are bad, but because the quest drops are too good."

But spreadsheets are only a part of the equation. "The loot in the raid game is an achievement system, like Xbox Live. Your badge of honor—but it's the goals that are the game. I understand that emotion—I've gone through it before."

One would assume, then, that peace of mind would allow Blizzard to reopen the big book of *Whatever Happened To...?* to the chapters on hero classes and unfinished zones like Hyjal or Grim Batol—or even fix "bad" existing zones, such as Ashenvale and its wonky quest progression.

"One of the best compliments I've seen for *Burning Crusade* is that once you've done the 60-to-70 [level] experience, it's painful to go back to early *WOW*. We're perfectionists around here, so I bitch and moan all the time about different zones. I want to revamp Felwood; Azshara needs a bunch of stuff.... But people probably played more Molten Core than any console game you can think of. So is it really necessary to keep every single zone totally relevant for the current player base on *WOW*? I don't think the answer's necessarily yes."

"Wouldn't it be interesting," says Metzen, "if we just rolled Stormwind today? Just burned it to the ground. How would that feel? It would feel *bitchin'*. Or we melt the ice caps and just flood Stormwind. That's not just another Wednesday morning or Friday at 2 a.m. That's a call to arms." >

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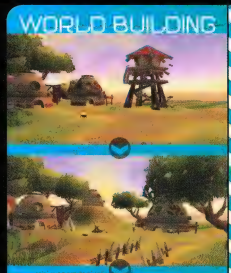
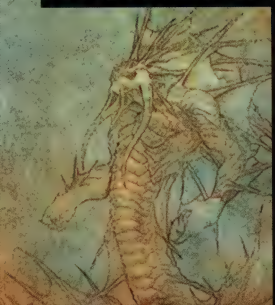
WORLD BUILDING



In constructing a zone like Nagrand, Blizzard follows a rule we hear echoed in many place designers' halls: "Realism is the most important part of all this stuff," says lead exterior artist Gary Platner. "That's why we miss our ship dates all the time."

Despite the expansive, sprawling nature of *WOW*'s zones, Blizzard avoids design by algorithm. Even the dullest square inch of the Badlands is hand-built—every rock, hay bale, and dirt patch painstakingly placed. "We don't use any procedural randomized dropping down of trees; we place every tree by hand; we paint terrain by hand; it's all customized."

"We've never been about the number of polygons," adds Chris Metzen. "We rely on art direction and trying to be clever—it's about color theory, it's about environment design. Dammit, we don't need all those polys."



Rob Pardo and crew often face tough design choices: "Like, would you rather we work on the next expansion, or would you rather we fix C'Thun?"

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The Black Temple (and beyond)

"The End" is relative.

By the time you read this, patch 2.1—containing, among other things, the 25-man raid dungeon the Black Temple—will be live on Blizzard's test realm. Containing nine bosses, including a central chamber with four different boss wings that can be cleared in any order, and culminating in the Illidan fight promised in (and subsequently modeled after) *The Burning Crusade* trailer, the Black Temple represents the end of what Blizzard considers the "shipping version" of *BC*.

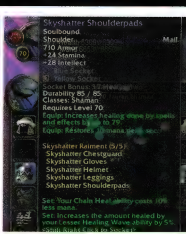
"Illidan is Boba Fett," says Chris Metzen. "He's got a cool design, he gets your imagination going...but in the great big scheme of *World of WarCraft*, he's not that big. Actually, Boba Fett got eaten by a big hole in the ground."

"The whole inspiration was the intro to *The Burning Crusade*," says lead level designer Cory Stockton, keying in on Blizzard's back-and-forth way of working. "He's obviously balanced to be the hardest boss in the game. At the same level as [Battle of Mount Hyjal boss] Archimonde or a bit tougher."

"We try to make the character really cool," adds lead game designer Tom Chilton, "and then balance him to be really hard—and then from there, it's just voodoo."

As for what happens once Illidan's old news: "We're going to have patches between now and the future that have more bosses," Chilton says, "including ones that are major characters in *WarCraft III*. We always intended the *Burning Crusade* content that was there from the get-go to be very oriented around Illidan as a central figure. And we'll have content patches beyond that with post-Illidan bosses.... There are certainly other *Burning Crusade*–related bosses that we have yet to touch, like Kil'jaeden—major Legion bosses."

"And it's no secret we're working on the next expansion," adds lead producer Shane Dabiri.



Tauren Shaman decked out in full tier 6: Once again, players can choose the set that fits their talent build.

GEAR CHECK

Like all good bosses, Black Temple's big baddies leave behind purple goodies. Peek at the stats for a glimpse at what's in store.

"We're so bad about getting geeky with terms like 'tier 6, tier 1.5,'" says Vice President of Game Design Rob Pardo. "That's what we call it around here, and it suddenly ends up on websites. I still remember when the name 'creeps' got into *WarCraft III*—and that was never intended. That was just some document I wrote about creeps, critters, and chickens, and suddenly people have the term 'creeping' and 'creeps.'"

ILLIDAN'S CREW

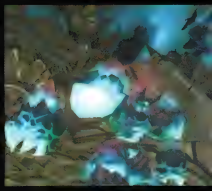
The Temple's first three bosses

HIGH WARLORD NAJ'ENTUS

"Thank Chris Metzen for that name," says Stockton of the Black Temple's first boss. "He loves the apostrophes." The last remaining Naga warlord after Lady Vashj's death ("on farm status," jokes Chilton) guards the sewers of the once-great (and now-leveled) city of Karabor—your "secret entrance" into the Black Temple proper...and where a few thousand gallons of Zangarmarsh's lake water wound up.

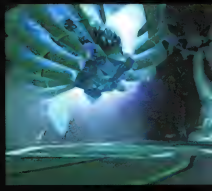
SUPREMUS

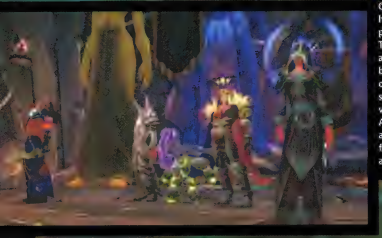
Crawl out of the Karabor sewers, and you'll wind up in the Black Temple courtyard beyond the main gates—it serves as the Illidari training ground, complete with Fel Orcs and high-flying nether drake mounts. A big blue abyssal with the humble name of Supremus awaits. He's the Black Temple's second boss, guardian of the door to the Temple proper, and Illidan has given him a single order: *None shall pass.*



RELIQUARY OF THE LOST

Once inside the Temple, raiders have a choice of four different paths. Down one of them: The Reliquary of the Lost, an ancient *something* created way back during the destruction of Karabor. "We wanted to do something very unique and very different," says Stockton. An *Alien* facehugger housing a rotating mass of screaming faces chained to the crumbling architecture? That'll do it.





● "We tried to make a lot of pulls here unique and different," says Cory Stockton. "There are some interesting summoning five-pulls."

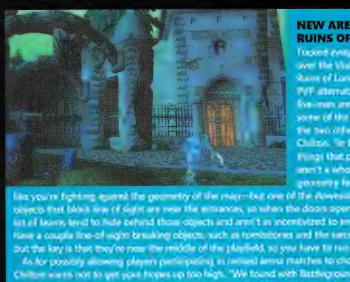
THE OTHER END GAME: THE BATTLE OF MOUNT HYJAL

Set within the temporally shifting stasis-tites and stalagmites of the Caverns of Time, the 25-man Battle of Mount Hyjal represents the second half of the Black Temple raid tier. "You're playing NET [the seventh map of the Night Elf campaign] from WarCraft III," says lead level designer Cory Stockton. As in the Black Morass, players first themselves fending off waves of incoming enemies rather than crawling through groups of stationary mobs; here, the raid party defends the Alliance, Horde, and then Night Elf settlements from the Scourge. Part of the challenge is figuring out when to engage the NPCs—hero and trash units from the original WCIII fight—in the battle. "That's up to you," says Stockton. "You can just lame of the ghouls back to the Alliance fifteen, and they'll get there involved in the fight... [anta Jhrouldmoore] is extremely powerful, so getting his involved would help you." Each increasingly difficult phase ends in a boss battle (raid loot drop); beating the first phase drops the Black Temple key for your raid, and the third phase culminates in the fitting destruction of WCIII big bad Archimonde.

While Hyjal's been live in *The Burning Crusade* since launch, as of press time, none of the major raid guilds have yet to set foot in it—partially because of some entrenched tuning on Serpentshrine and The Eye, lists of the prerequisite 25-man raids required before entering Hyjal. "Serpentshrine was easier to get keyed for than The Eye," explains lead designer Tom Chilton. "Just because the tuning on Magtheredon was really tough. A lot of guilds have just chosen to stick with one raid zone until they've mastered it and the encounters, and they'll move onto the next one."

The Black Temple (above) is just one piece of the "tier 6" raid dungeons...

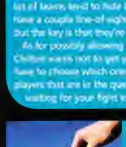
...Caverns of Time: The Battle of Mount Hyjal is the other major part.



NEW ARENA: RUINS OF LORDAERON

Tucked away in Tirisfal Glades, just over the Vitulitety, lies the new Ruins of Lordaeron arena—a new PVP alternative for two-, three-, and five-man arena teams. "We've taken some of the lessons we learned in the two other arenas," says Tom Chilton. "In Nagrand, one of the things that people like is that there aren't a whole lot of terrain or geometry features, so you don't feel like you're fighting against the geometry of the map—but one of the downsides is that the primary objects that block line of sight are near the entrances, so when the doors open and the fights starts, a lot of teams tend to hide behind those objects and aren't as incentivized to engage. In Lordaeron, we have a couple line-of-sight-breaking objects, such as tombstones and the sarcophagus in the center, but the key is that they're near the middle of the playfield, so you have to run out to them."

As for possibly allowing players perspicuity in ranked arena matches to choose their own map, Chilton warns not to get your hopes up too high. "We found with Battlegrounds that since you have to choose which one you want to go into, every battleground you add reduces the number of players that are in the queue for each." A tough trade-off: less freedom, or more time to find white waiting for your fight to start!



COMING SOON: GUILD BANKS

Say goodbye to your mules! One of the things Blizzard will be adding after patch 2.1 is a long-requested feature: guild banks. New NPC bankers will appear in every bank in the game where guild members can go to deposit and withdraw items—eliminating the need for guilds to create characters just for storage needs.

Guild banks are free and will have the potential to offer several hundred slots through multiple tabs and bags. "We want to actively give players a free alternative to using a mule character," says Chilton. "We essentially already pay for that database storage anyway because of these mule characters, so there's no real reason for us to discourage using guild banks." You'll also be able to permit guildies of certain ranks to repair directly from guild bank funds. Any repair NPC (bats included) will boast a new button allowing you to use guild bank funds rather than your own.

The potential for abuse is obvious, but Blizzard seems to have it covered. Guild leaders will be able to set permission levels—so, for example, guildies of certain ranks can deposit but not withdraw, or only withdraw certain types of items, or only withdraw so many items per day. Guilds will be able to purchase multiple tabs (up to six, though Blizzard's toying with that number), to store say, all mining items, or all weapons, and only let certain members access those tabs.

Blizzard's website will track all transactions, so should any guild leaders try to scam guildies (by taking a bunch of stuff and transferring, for example), you've got a written record—at which point Blizzard's customer service would take over.

COMING SOON: IN-GAME VOICE CHAT

Good news for folks who like to talk and play: Coming sometime after patch 2.1, Blizzard is adding in-game voice chat (or VOIP, for you nerdlings)—meaning no more diddling around trying to explain to pick up groups (PUGs) what Ventrilo and TeamSpeak are. Now you'll be able to talk to other players right through the game's main interface. Not that Blizzard has a problem with third-party voice programs—they don't—but with VOIP actually built in to the game itself, the developers can add features to complement and improve gameplay.

One example? When someone talks, their name will light up on the interface, and you can click on the name to target them. "One of the things that happens a lot over Ventrilo," says Tom Chilton, "is someone says 'Heal me!' and then the healer says, 'Who? I'm?' So now you'll see their name come up, you click on it, you've got them targeted, and start healing."

Blizzard will also be able to separate voice chat into different channels from the game's music—meaning, for example, that you could have the game's sound and music go through your external speakers, while having voice chat pipe just through your headset. Or the music can be automatically suppressed once someone starts talking. When it first rolls out, in-game voice chat will be limited just to parties and raids, though Blizzard is planning on adding Ventrilo-style custom channels for players down the line—and meanwhile, programs like Ventrilo will always remain totally compatible. Our (and Blizzard's) secret hope for voice chat: Better pick up groups, since communication and coordination will be easier. But what if that great group leader turns out to sound 9 years old?

WILL WE EVER SEE A WARCRAFT IV?

Once upon a time, *WarCraft* was actually a series of real-time strategy games. Perhaps you remember! (In fact, we were once skeptical that Blizzard would successfully transform the series into an MMO.) But now that *World Of WarCraft* rules the universe, does this mean the end of the *WarCraft* strategy games? Will we ever see a *WarCraft IV*?

"I think it's totally possible," says vice president of creative development Chris Metzen. "There's always gonna be stories to tell that way, potentially. The trick is, what happens to *WOW* if you do that? Do you have to put it in a different place? You can certainly do it in a different time, but that's kinda cheating. You can make up a new continent that isn't in *WOW*, where a new RTS would take place. There's any number of ways you can make that work. I can't even wrap my head around another *WarCraft* RTS. No more Orcs...no more green."

For Metzen, *World of WarCraft's* universe and plotline are advancing in such a huge way over the next planned expansions, that where and how they'd fit into a smaller-scale, static RTS isn't quite fathomable yet.

"We've got a lot of ideas on where [*WOW*] goes," he says. "There's some big power players out there in the universe. We just met the Naaru—who are they? We've said things about the Titans, and Sargeras is out there. Justice must come. What is the fiery, pyrrhic, apocalyptic ending of the *WarCraft* universe? I don't know. But it's all drawing together. We talk about this stuff all the time—where is this really going? *Burning Crusade* opened the door to the fact that this is a far bigger [conflict]. There's a lot of worlds out there, a big good-and-evil thing happening, and it's just so far beyond Orcs and humans. Depending on where it all goes, and down the road if we even wanted to do an RTS, do you leverage that into it? Is it grander in scale? I don't know. There's a lot of directions you can go."

So many stories, so little time: Chris Metzen ponders returning to Azeroth on a smaller scale.

FAVORITE 5-MAN?
"I'd have to say that Blade's Edge arena is my favorite five-man instance. Not only am I a big fan of the 5 vs. 5 arena battles, I enjoy the way that Blade's Edge allows players to gain an edge by using the map to their advantage... using line of sight, jumps, and multiple effective routes to engage the enemy. While the Nagrand arena sometimes encourages a slow start to a fight as players evaluate their opponents from behind cover, the Blade's Edge arena pushes players into the engagement because of the existence of tactical vantage points at the center of the arena."—Tom Chilton, Lead Game Designer

FAVORITE ZONE?
"You can't go wrong with blue and orange! The lighting in Zangarmarsh is completely immersive. Also, we went a little wild with the mushrooms. I don't know if you noticed them, but those creeping upon spore holes on the backs of the Fungal Giants can't be healthy."—Chris Robinson, Lead Character Artist

FAVORITE MOMENT?
"The Thrall thing in Nagrand (where he meets his grandmother, Grandmother Gayahi) is probably my favorite part of the game."—Chris Metzen, VP of Creative Development

FAVORITE ZONE?
"In The Burning Crusade, Nagrand. It's a beautiful zone with an excellent quest progression."—Jeff Kaplan, Lead Game Designer

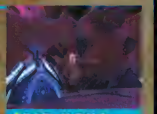
IN TONGUES
Of the Bone Wastes of Terokkar Forest, Lesiuen the Soul-Caller has something to say—if you can translate Demonic. (Yes, it's possible.)

FAVORITE CHARACTER?

"Vistos Pinchwhistle seems to have a selection of gear that I'm very interested in obtaining as quickly as possible, and I've been quite satisfied each time we've done business so far." —*Tom Chilton, Lead Game Designer*

KAEL'THAS

With the Blood Elves, Blizzard set up a crisis of conscience. "They're kinda good, they're kinda bad," says lead level designer Cory Stockton. "All the Blood Elves in Quel'Thalas think that Kael'thas is gonna come back [from Outland] to save them one day. But they don't know he's allied with the Legion.... they don't know what he's building up to yet."



R.I.P., N.O.V.A.

In the Crumbling Wastes of Netherstorm, you'll find a headstone flashing the name of a Blizzard NPC. Keep a vigil, and you may catch a special appearance.

STEAL THIS BOOK

You can get a very rare "antique gun" (1 in 10,000) from pickpocketed goblinoids. The name etched in it—Lantor—is a reference to the gun in the *Firefly* episode "Trash."

"You can pickpocket a Steamy Romance Novel from humanoids in Outland. The characters [Marcus and Nalee] refer to one of the game's designers and his wife.

As for hero classes, Pardo says that comes with its own set of inherent problems. "I think we're probably more likely to do a new class next, before we really tackle the hero classes. Some of the things we wanted to do with hero classes, we did through talents—so whatever we do with them, or *if* we do them, is probably going to take a different form than what we originally thought."

LAST OF THE OLD-SCHOOL MMOS?

While *WOW* holds dominion, Blizzard keeps an eye on the future—which, if the folks at BioWare Austin or other up-and-coming MMO studios are to be believed, hinges on involving players in a world they can't really affect, suspending suspension of disbelief and making the impersonal MMO structure feel somehow wholly your own. "A lot of developers say, 'We're going to make it a real interactive world, and it's going to change and flex depending on what people are doing,'" says Metzen. "And that's the noblest goal of all. I want to play that.... But it'd be a nightmare to make."

And even after all this time, Blizzard can't quite pinpoint the *why*. What about *WOW* warrants the 8.5 million players—the fans, the addicts, the broken marriages, the newfound friendships? "It's definitely the last of the old-school MMORPGs. But the cohesion of it, the placement of every rock, the tone of the quests and the armor you put on...it's in there somewhere," says Metzen, though he may as well be talking about any Blizzard game. "*WarCraft II* wasn't genius or anything.... I just went over those scripts a little while ago; they were horrible. I didn't know what I was doing at all, if you can argue that I do today. But I remember going, 'There'll be a difference if we construct some history and let it breathe.' Just give it a little bit of heart. Nobody will see it coming." ●

For more *WOW*, visit GFW07.1UP.com, where you'll find extended interviews with Chris Metzen and Rob Pardo, along with other tier 1UP loot.

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FAVORITE QUEST LINE?

"The Cipher of Damnation [Shadowmoon Valley] comes to mind; I'll always love the Titan Forging quests. —*Jeff Kaplan, Lead Game Designer*

CRUSADE'S END?

Not quite. Blizzard drops some post-Illidan hints on pg. 56.

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THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

People occasionally ask why we don't do "exclusive reviews." The reason is that the negatives far outweigh the positives: Yes, we get to review a high-profile game before any other competing publications...but in doing so we put ourselves at the mercy of two frustrating factors.

The first is timing. If a game is ready for reviewing, it's logically near finished, right? Well, not necessarily. Take our last "exclusive review," *The Sims 2* (*Computer Gaming World* #244, Nov. 2004): As we neared our issue's ship date, we were receiving updated builds of the game from publisher EA almost every day. We luckily managed to craft a good review of the "near-final reviewable" version before the issue went out the door, but it presented a constant source of headaches and second-guessing, which *shouldn't* be part of any review process.

The other (and bigger) sticking point is the matter of perception. Who says deals aren't made between publisher and publication? Even the most honest exclusive review (and as far as we know, most *are*) causes discerning readers to wonder if that glowing score (again, like our 5-of-5 *Sims 2* review) is entirely credible. Why subject ourselves to that kind of skepticism? ● **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award
Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a *GFW* Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent
Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average
Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible
Never should have been made.

• A sighting of the rare and dangerous Ukranian fecalsaur.

• In *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, tension eggs you on because it frequently feels like someone—or something—is following you.

• Frontal assaults are rarely a good idea, as you will get flanked—often. But we hear that these soldiers like the taste of shrapnel.

• "Hey, Yuri, it's your turn to tell a ghost story. How about that one where the two young lovers are making out in their car and they're killed by capitalists?"

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

Mad Maxim: Beyond the Containment Dome

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: GSC Game World GENRE: First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail Buy ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-32 players VERSION REVIEWED: Xbox 360

REVIEW

In other first-person shooters, forward is the one and only way to go. Glowing switches and spawning goons and out-of-the-ordinary lighting and other less obvious goads reassure you that you're on the right path. You can see a film and not understand a scene, read a novel and not comprehend a chapter, and the show or the story still goes on. Not so with games. And, as more and more players play more and more games, a "no gamer left behind" mentality emerges. Whether developers decide to lean on figurative signposts or to give up and graffiti their games with literal and gratuitous arrows (as *Perfect Dark Zero* did on Xbox 360 and *Half-Life 2: Survivor* does in Japanese arcades), hours and hours of guinea pig input had some say in it. You can imagine movies and TV shows focus-grouped this way, but what about videogames that aren't?

OK, Ukraine-made *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* isn't the first FPS to assume its audience is intelligent—far from it. Perhaps it's the way it is because the studio bypassed the public part of the test-iterate-test phase to cut costs. Or maybe it was the cultural distance between Kiev and L.A. that made the difference? Or the lag in time between 2001 when GSC Game World announced the title and today in 2007 when market analysts advocate FPS as a "growth genre"? Is it, in other words, just that *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is similar to some American shooters made *before* "everyone" became a target audience?

SLAG PILE OF FORKING PATHS

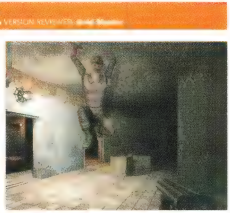
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. isn't quite *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. You can't pick a compass point and press on until you hit something interesting; invisible radiation prevents you from scouting a level's perimeter and looking out over the edges, and still *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s landscape is less movie set "Main Street" than *Call of Duty*'s or *Half-Life*'s or *Ghost Recon*'s. However constant the tracks, the width of the course changes: Early on, an elevated railway impedes progress. Government men guard one road beneath a bridge and will let you through for a fee or a gunfight. A tunnel works, too...only it's stoppered with electromagnetic anomalies (the PDA file on a nearby dead man explains the environmental puzzle). And finally, a hole in the fence lets you through, if you look to find it. Even when the way isn't triplicate, it feels more natural than another FPS's unspooling script. You'll circle a building burglarlike, for example, before finding a point of entry (and perhaps meet a prisoner who—calling from his cell window—makes a mission offer as you pass).

> UKRAINE-MADE S.T.A.L.K.E.R. ISN'T THE FIRST FPS TO ASSUME ITS AUDIENCE IS INTELLIGENT—FAR FROM IT.

Everything Bad Is Good For You author Steve Johnson argues that "far more than books or movies or music, games force you to make *decisions* [...] all the intellectual benefits of gaming derive from this fundamental virtue, because learning how to think is ultimately about learning to make the right decisions: weighing evidence, analyzing situations, consulting your long-term goals, and then deciding." I'll add that choice-rich games are often not only more intellectually engaging, but also more entertaining. Too few single-player shooters force us to make decisions other than when to shoot and what to shoot it with. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* complicates things by adding both "how to get there" and "whom to oppose/whom to help." One time—and, like *Oblivion*, this is the variety of videogame that lends itself to stories that start with "one time"—I encountered a gang of itinerant stalkers off the highway, and I wondered what was going on. "Buy a Gauss magnetic accelerator gun?" one asked. He wanted next to nothing for it. But once my money was in his hands, he told me to beat it. I happened to have a loaded underbarrel grenade launcher, but the decision to barter and then to fight back cost me more in scarce munitions than in coin.

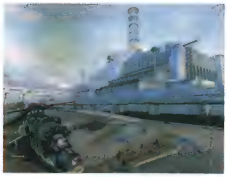
RADIATION SCARE

In its deep underground facilities (GSC's answer to dungeons), *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is scarier than *F.E.A.R.* itself. Poltergeists fly past. Invisible hands hurl barrels as your flashlight bobs for the next noise. At times—Geiger counter crackling—I wanted to turn the game off, or at least get topside and into the light. Down here, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* fares better if evaluated as an FPS with RPG trappings than as a fully fledged hybrid. You lock and load for these things, stock up on armor-piercing bullets and first-aid tins and radiation antidotes, and retool the assortment of artifacts in your belt (think: enchanted items that slow blood loss or limit electrocution injury at the expense of some other vulnerability). The trouble is returning to the shop if it turns out that your rucksack's stuffed wrong. Although RPG-*like*, the game won't let you click-port between key map points to cut out the hiking. Similarly, a more RPG-derived economy might've solved another snafu (that >



● **Check out these exclusive shots from the set of *The Hills Have Eyes 4: The Musical.***

• **Radiation masks work better if you wear clothes on the rest of your body.**



• **Welcome to the beautiful future home of *GFW* Estates. This prime acreage is a unique fixer-upper opportunity that you should get in on *now*!**

WHAT'S MOST UNUSUAL, AND PERHAPS MOST UNIQUE, IS THE DEGREE OF DETAIL LAVISHED ON LOCATIONS THAT NOT EVERY PLAYER WILL VISIT

also leads to the least satisfying of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s moralizing endings): lotsa money to spend and little to spend it on.

Branches of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s family tree trace back to Austin, Texas and *Deus Ex* developer Ion Storm, but others, those involving the way it looks, seem Ukraine-native. The game's "exclusion zone" setting, a no-man's-land roughly 30 square kilometers surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear reactor, is very much *Mad Maxim*: post-Soviet road warriors just beyond the containment dome. Bleak as the end of the world (or at least life as we know it), it's an invention as gorgeous as years-old graphics overhauled for a late launch get. Wet squalls and lightning and ripping winds roll through, irradiated wolves track boar through the brush, and everywhere, these weird electromagnetic disturbances shiver and hum and distort space.

What's most unusual, and perhaps most unique to GSC Game World's direction, is the degree of detail lavished on locations that not every player will visit. For instance, I'm finishing the game (again), angling for alternate endings (seven in all). I know where I've got to go. Instead, I decide to see if those tenements over there are hollow or if they have interiors, and it turns out that they do; block after block, basement to upper balcony, teeming with real estate to explore and treasure seekers to kill. This, under boiling-point pressure and in the closing chapter.

Far away from even voluntary objectives, you'll find vandalized factories and woody, overgrown villages, every girder and path of planks traversable and rendered down to the rust. In a *Half-Life*, these set the stage for climactic moments; here, in this much-removed "zone of alienation," they're home to loner guitarists and feral dogs.

These days, Americans just don't design shooters this way. • **Shawn Elliott**

VERDICT

- **Open-ended hybrid gameplay that offers more to do than "point-and-shoot."**
- **Some set dressing exists purely for show; not enough stuff to spend your cash on.**

8/10

Games for Windows

INFERNAL

Oh god, you devil!

Fear my awesome telekinetic powers—for with them, I shall, um, move barrels!

PUBLISHER: Playlogic/Atlus Interactive DEVELOPER: Metropolis Software GENRE: Third-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Launch Date ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Xbox 360

REVIEW

You have to go all the way back to *Daikatana*'s robot frogs to find a shooter that opens as ineptly as *Infernal*. It does get better, thank goodness, but someone really should have reminded developer Metropolis Software about the importance of first impressions—because if this had been a blind date, I would have excused myself to the bathroom and climbed out the window after the first hour.

A terrible cut-scene, with vacant-eyed, plastic-looking 3D characters reciting cringe-inducing dialogue, sets up the even-more-cringe-inducing (and nonsensical) plot: You are Ryan Lennox, an angel with tattoos and a goatee and a handy repertoire of tough-guy wisecracks, fallen from heaven and now enlisted by hell to do its bidding. At least that's what you tell the hot, pouty-lipped female angel with the excellent stomach muscles. Next, you get ambushed by a, um, swarm of armed goons from heaven. And I'm not sure which is worse: The fact that heaven employs armed goons, or the fact that even with the Creator on their side, these guys still can't shoot straight (the AI is atrocious throughout). Whatever the case, it's a terrible opening—a glorious burst of lameness that may send you rushing to the uninstall button. But hang in there, because the game gets better.

Infernal isn't a first-person shooter; it's played from an over-the-shoulder third-person perspective, with as much of an emphasis on "OK, how do I get past *this* now?" puzzle-solving as on shooting. It's the *Half-Life* school of design—all strict linearity and scripted sequences—and, despite its derivativeness, gets better as your goodie bag of tricks expands over the game's five long missions.

As an agent from hell, you are endowed with special powers that just so happen to provide the exact solutions to every obstacle thrown at you. A right-click unleashes a blast of demonic firepower, but requires mana, which only regenerates in darkness. The power of telekinesis (this game's version of the gravity gun) lets you move objects from a great distance—including dead bodies that you can then use to siphon health and ammo back to yourself. Best of all is teleportation, which lets you temporarily transport yourself to normally inaccessible places, as well as sneak up behind enemies—both of which figure heavily in the game's puzzles and boss fights. Near the end of mission three, *Infernal* throws a timed puzzle at you that is essentially an obstacle course of everything you've learned so far, and it's quite satisfying to finish. On the other hand, a number of puzzles lack adequate clues and internal logic, meaning lots of guesswork and luck, or constant visits to message boards (or, in my case, calls to the company). And here's one more gripe: How come I can take 50 bullets to the head, but I die from one 3-foot jump into water?

> HOW COME I CAN TAKE 50 BULLETS TO THE HEAD, BUT I DIE FROM ONE 3-FOOT-JUMP INTO WATER?

So it's not going to win any awards. And the lack of multiplayer plus the linear gameplay means minimal replay value. But *Infernal* is just clever enough to warrant a mild recommendation to shooter fans looking for a fix. Just don't expect any miracles. ●**Jeff Green**

VERDICT

+ Some clever tricks; purty-looking graphics.

- Poor A.I.; not enough feedback/hints; lame story; horrid dialogue.

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

●Take that you...um...armed angel!

SILENT HUNTER: WOLVES OF THE PACIFIC

In the night of the deep

PUBLISHER Ubisoft DEVELOPER Ubisoft GENRE Simulation AVAILABILITY Retail; E-tail (www.ubisoft.com) ESRB RATING Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 6GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED Retail v1.1

REVIEW

Hardcore simulation fanatics are their own worst enemy: They bemoan the lack of simulations available, and then—when a publisher invests the money to develop one—declare the game unworthy of the two cents of polycarbonate on the disc due to its lack of realism. "How could the developers call this a 'simulation' when the altimeter dial is clearly 0.2 centimeters larger than the real thing? It's unplayable!" The publisher sighs, fires the development team, and makes sure its next game is another first-person shooter. Those irate fans should bite their tongues, though: *Wolves of the Pacific* (fourth in the *Silent Hunter* submarine sim franchise) will make all but the most jaded undersea warfare enthusiasts happy.

KILL OR BE KILLED

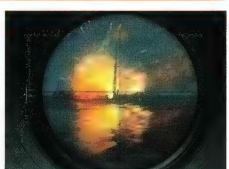
A good sub sim is all about the hunt—the cat-and-mouse game of a hidden assassin skulking unseen under the water like a shark sniffing out its next dinner. You never know whether that weak sonar contact will turn out to be a juicy freighter or a deadly destroyer. *Wolves* succeeds at immersing you in that role as an American submarine commander in World War II's Pacific theater. At the heart of the game lies a superb career mode, in which no two patrols are the same. You're assigned any one of a variety of missions, such as area patrol, recon, and agent insertion; a mission may be uneventful, with few contacts...or you might stumble upon a Japanese carrier task force. Radio updates informing you of historical events occurring during your patrols—such as the Japanese invasion of Wake Island or the Battle of Midway—provide a feeling of participating in a dynamic, living WWII.

Wolves presents you with the difficult decisions U.S. WWII submarine commanders were forced to make, e.g., whether to travel at higher speeds on the surface and risk detection or slow speeds and limited submersion time, or whether to continue an attack on a high-value convoy while under pursuit by destroyers. As you advance in experience and rank, you'll get to helm some of the more advanced subs (the game features six submarine classes) with their better guns and larger torpedo loadouts...but you'll never feel safe when you run up against more powerful warships and aircraft.

UNDERWATER TURBULENCE

While the game does a great job of providing the drama and suspense of WWII submarine operations, some exasperating bugs exist, such as the "autolevel" hotkey crashing the game, undocumented sonar directional controls (use the Home and End keys for this), and a radar that doesn't function properly. Antialiasing is disabled altogether, and changing the resolution to anything higher than 1024 by 768 only upsizes—and pixelates—the lower-resolution 3D models rather than actually increasing the true resolution. None of it's game-killing, unless your requirement for "realism" is absolute. But these technical faults mean some inevitable irritation.

Really good simulations have the ability to make you sweat, and while *Wolves of the Pacific* is still a patch or two away from realizing its full potential, the thrill of the hunt and the constant risk of instantly switching from hunter to hunted provide an abundance of nail-biting tension and drama. ● **Jeff Lackey**



● **Gray seas—and skies—in the waters off of Japan.**

VERDICT

7/10

GOOD

Dynamic campaign; options to make it as easy or as realistic as you like.

Numbers bugs; deceptive resolution options that don't function as expected.

Games for Windows

GENESIS RISING: THE UNIVERSAL CRUSADE

Beautiful to look at, frustrating to play

PUBLISHER: **DreamCatcher Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Metamorf** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-12 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

The past is littered with great-looking games that left gamers cold. Throw sci-fi RTS *Genesis Rising* onto that pile of rubble—it's concentrated boredom, punctuated by frantic chaos that you can't hope to control.

It got to the point that I let out a heavy sigh any time I was about to engage in battle. The number of ships under my command was just high enough that I couldn't possibly babysit them individually...but also too few to get the job done without my constant intervention. Real-time strategy gameplay is often burdened by throngs of throwaway units, but *Genesis Rising* makes you manage a handful of utterly indispensable ones.

Ships require micromanagerial games, gems determine the capabilities of each craft. This mechanic holds some entertaining potential but doesn't override the game's shortcomings.

Often, by the time I finalized a blueprint, I found myself too busy battling the camera to manually fire weapons intelligently. Even worse, the tutorial insultingly suggests you add to the micromanagement by moving ships to avoid missiles!

Glacial starship speed, combined with dull resource collection, results in excruciating boredom before a fight, and because you can only save your progress at the end of a mission, the game forces you to play entire lengthy battles—and their cinematics—over and over. I felt like the developer was punishing me for ogling the game engine and enjoying the music.

The exhausting campaign means that those pleasing pictures are best watched in a hidden LAN skirmish mode or in multiplayer (if anyone were actually online). It's easy to spend an hour watching these nifty starships float around a two-dimensional plane, but as soon as you start mousing, you'll want to quit. ● **David L. Long**

OFTEN, I FOUND MYSELF TOO BUSY BATTLING THE CAMERA TO MANUALLY FIRE WEAPONS INTELLIGENTLY.

● **This fellow can help you out with all your talkhead needs—wait, what's a talkhead?**

VERDICT

- **Looks great; the game's hidden skirmish mode is mildly entertaining.**
- **No midmission save; interface too fiddly; camera needs too much babysitting.**

3/10 BAD

Games for Windows

SILVERFALL

Falls apart

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Monte Cristo** GENRE: **Action-RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 Players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

How do you get *Diablo* wrong? It's like screwing up tic-tac-toe or something. But that's just what Monte Cristo's done with *Silverfall*, an epically crummy action-RPG with gimpy controls and bugs that'd make a flop-house mattress blush.

Folks, start your lawn mowers. You're Some Guy™ kicked out of your city (Silverfall) by demons and tasked with winning it back, one gopher gig at a time. That means pointing your mouse at the nearest forest/swamp/dungeon/et cetera stocked with hundreds of Frankenfantasy critters and hewing with your hack-o-matic arsenal like an autistic finger-tapper. "Combat" and "Magic" skills comprise the scaffolding that'll build your Human/Elf/Goblin/Troll into an ace fighter or magic-user, while a third, ambivalently labeled "Other," lets you hedge points in oppositional "Nature" or "Technology" trees. Want defense-boosting neural mods? Acid blood? Mechanical slaves? Lycanthropy? You got 'em...if you can get *to* them before *Silverfall* hitches on silly glitches compounded by even sillier design choices.

For starters, the minimap has a pointer...but the main map doesn't, forcing you to juggle both to get your bearings in a genre that's as amenable to disruption as sex. Worse, the mini-map arrow moronically tracks the camera's—and not your hero's—facing, which works about as slickly as navigating a tank with two steering wheels through a minefield. Creatures level up as you do, too, making tangible progress ephemeral until you plow into some new area and reboot the zoo.

Half the time, the game stops working alto-gether. Critical buttons disappear from the interface bar and take a reload to fix, items inexplicably vanish from your inventory, clicking on inaccessible areas makes you bolt in the opposite direction, and—not a bug, but annoy-ing—vegetation occasionally "blocks" your hits so you'll waste several precious clicks hitting nothing (and, joy of joys, dying). *Diablo* clone? Don't flatter it. ● **Matt Peckham**

● **Prepare to die—because *Silverfall*'s creatures level up when you do!**

VERDICT

- **Unique skill sets.**
- **Vexing design choices; ridiculous bugs; contrived creature level-up mechanic.**

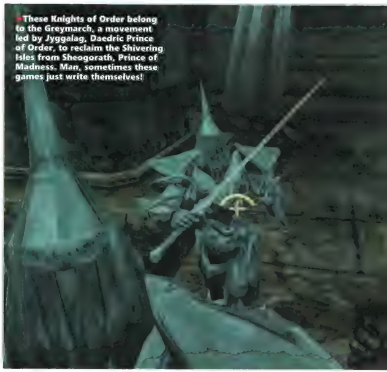
3/10 BAD

Games for Windows

Ahhhh, I haven't shared a lovely sunset with a pile of corpses like this since I left Bleakfall.

THE ITANIC VERSION OF THE ISLES IS VIBRANT AND COLOURFUL. WHILE THE DEMENTED VERSION IS BLOODY AND DARK.

As part of the main quest, you'll reactivate a dungeon used to prevent adventurers from making it safely to the Isles. Using clever traps, you can either kill them or drive them mad. Such fun!



These Knights of Order belong to the Greymarch, a movement led by Jyggalag, Daedric Prince of Order, to reclaim the Shivering Isles from Sheogorath, Prince of Madness. Man, sometimes these games just write themselves!

ELDER SCROLLS IV: SHIVERING ISLES

Still crazy

PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Bethesda Softworks GENRE: RPG AVAILABILITY: Retail; E-tail (www.direct2drive.com) ESRB RATING: Mature MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1.1GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: None: Final Build/Gamebryo

REVIEW

I often find myself saying to…er, myself: "You know, 200-plus hours of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* just ain't enough." Well, thanks to what I can only assume is a lesser-known provision of the Patriot Act, *Oblivion* developer Bethesda Softworks learned of my innermost desires and whipped up *Shivering Isles*, an expansion to last year's hit RPG that promises 30 more hours of jaunting through magical lands and harassing disturbingly lifelike NPCs.

NON SUM QUALIS ERAM

Unlike earlier *Oblivion* add-on *Knights of the Nine*, *Shivering Isles* is more than a series of new quests. Here, you pass into the titular Isles, an all-new realm ruled by Sheogorath, the Daedric Prince of Madness. Weighing in at more than a quarter of the size of the enormous main continent in *Oblivion*, the Isles offer plenty of new places to explore…and explore…and explore. Because many of *Shivering Isles*' quests require multiple trips to unknown locations (making it difficult to use *Oblivion*'s "fast-travel" system), and because you can't bring your horse to the Isles, get ready to slog through more useless real estate than a greenskeeper at Chernobyl Country Club.

Nevertheless, Bethesda employs a nifty device to extend the taste of its chewing gum: The Isles are divided into two separate realities: Mania and Dementia. While they share the same physical layout, the Manic version of the Isles is vibrant and colorful, while the Demented version is gloomy and dark. Both settings have their own nobility and warrior castes (the "Golden Saints" and "Dark Seducers," respectively), and both distrust and dislike each other. Not surprisingly, you get caught up in the middle of this web of intrigue; ultimately, you must decide whether you prefer to join the paranoid depressives or the delusional drug addicts—or else just merge the two to form the greatest grunge band ever. Meanwhile, Sheogorath tasks you with saving his twisted realm from the encroaching forces of Order, dealing with heretics who want to depose him, and handling a variety of other wacky tasks. And that says nothing about the countless miniquests you can perform on behalf of the Isles' freak show–reject denizens. Long story short: Gallons of gameplay here.

● **Lord Sheogorath himself. He's even got a pimp cane. And he does hair!**

● **Combat animations and spell effects still look stunning, even though it's been a year since *Oblivion*'s initial release.**

● **One interesting new locale: a village called "Split," where a sorcerer's brought the Manic and Demented versions of the citizens together in the same dimension. They all hate each other, of course.**

BONAE SUB REGNO CYRODIILIS

And gallons of snazzy new paint, too, from structures and costumes to whole new animations. But what's striking from the get-go (especially if you're returning to *Oblivion* after a hiatus) isn't the new stuff but rather how well the visuals hold up on *Oblivion*'s now year-old engine. Climb to the top of a ridge and gaze down into a lush Manic valley, and I double-dog-dare you not to give some quiet props.

The game mechanics—though unchanged—remain entertaining as well. *Shivering Isles* is intended for characters of any level, but you face off against cooler enemies and receive swankier items if you're in the upper echelon. Although the Isles feature all-new monsters, alchemical reagents, and loot, they *don't* feature any new gameplay elements, character abilities, playable races, or classes. While the "ain't broke, don't fix" mentality holds true here, *Shivering Isles* suffers as an expansion because, for all its cleverness in storytelling and quest design, you're ultimately running through the same activities you were up to your neck in during the original *Oblivion*.

LATIN SUCKS

OK, so *Shivering Isles* doesn't reinvent the fireball. But the impeccable design of the original game breathes life into this expansion—not, as you might assume, the other way around. If you're looking for more to do in (or an excuse to return to) the vibrant world of *Oblivion*, Sheogorath's kooky kingdom is well worth the $30 entry fee. ● **Eric Neigher**

TRAVEL TIPS

Getting around the Shivering Isles can be a harrowing experience for those of us who rely on antidepressants. However, if you follow these easy tips, you should get by with only minimal extra cost at the therapist.

1 **Fire! FFFF-FIRE!!** Many of the enemies in the Isles are vulnerable to flame attacks, so practice your magic…or rig up one of those hairspray-Ziego contraptions. Bravo.

2 **Build stuff.** You can craft amber and (especially) madness ore into excellent armor and weapons. Gather these raw materials, let smiths build them into the gear you want, and enchant it.

3 **Open yer yap.** Unlike the losers back in Cyrodiil, a high percentage of the Shivering Isles' residents have quests to assign. Don't be afraid to indulge in the odd repartee, even if the guy talking to you is also talking to his dog.

4 **Make like Chris Columbus.** Scads of non-quest-related dungeons litter the Shivering Isles, and most of them contain lucre that's at least slightly unclean.

VERDICT

- **More engaging content; graphics still look awesome.**
- **No new races, abilities, or magical effects; lots of schlepping from place to place; no horsies!**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

● You see, cars really can fly, Billy.

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

Say "aloha" to massively open online racing

PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Eden Games GENRE: Racing AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.testdriveunlimited.com) ESRB RATING: Everyone 10+ MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard (driving wheel recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Final Downloadable

REVIEW

On the mainland, even the most environmentally challenged redneck knows our smoking, polluting car culture is on the ropes. Well, screw the mainland; in Hawaii, gas gobbling isn't merely tolerated—it's *mandatory*. The more cars you have and the more miles you rack up, the better your place in life. You establish your relationships in them, and you make a name for yourself in them. In Hawaii, sidewalks exist only as runoff room for aggressive drivers.

This is the highly social, vehicle-crazed world of *Test Drive Unlimited*, a game so revolutionary and so downright ambitious that you can almost forget all those horrid *Test Drives* preceding it. *Almost*.

SUPERMODEL HITCHHIKERS? SIGN ME UP!

TDU is no mere racer—it's a drivingcentric, "massively open online racing" lifestyle. One minute you're slamming along a six-lane interstate at 200-plus mph with a gaggle of Euro-exotic speed merchants, the next you're taxiing some incredibly hot supermodel hitchhiker. Then you buy yourself some androgynously chic new duds, or perhaps a bigger garage for your fleet. In between, you might take a leisurely cruise with your buddies, unlocking new roads and challenges...or maybe just seeing the sights.

And what sights: Developer Eden Games (*Need for Speed: Porsche Unleashed*) somehow re-created the entire Hawaiian island of Oahu for your driving pleasure. The *entire* island. It's an amazing achievement that'll keep you exploring for weeks, if just to soak up the incredibly lush locales and diverse roadways. Moreover, most every horizontal surface is navigable—including tons of nooks and crannies in which to temporarily cower from the local constabulary.

Yet some may find Eden's freewheeling, unstructured concept more purposeless than compelling. Moreover, ultrahardcore racers will cringe at the arcade-meets-sim physics modeling and the lack of car tweaking. Still, with the exception of the game's few available motorcycles—which feel more tacked on than integral—*TDU*'s vehicles handle more plausibly than those in prior *Need for Speeds* or *Test Drives*. And for drivers who like to dig around, *TDU* supplies plenty of incentive.

OH, THE HUMANITY!

The game integrates online racing unlike anything before, effectively eradicating the line between multiplayer and single-player competition. Indeed, hundreds or thousands of humans roam the world right alongside the far inferior bots. Granted, you see and interact with a maximum of just eight random cars at a time, but snagging one for a fully customizable 1-on-1 challenge is as easy as checking your map, heading to that location, and flashing your headlights. A return flash means the duel is on. You'll likely need to drop your resolution to prevent a slideshow, and certainly some competitors warp around like crazy, but a patch should hopefully resolve that.

Online perks aside, *TDU* works so well because it nails that fine balance point between insane speed and due care. Though you (sadly) can't damage your own car, you generally need to steer clear of both the scenery and the traffic while also interpreting your GPS directions *and* racing as fast as possible. Tense? The only way it could be more so is if the game supported rain and night driving.

Rough in spots and a bit too casual for some, *Test Drive Unlimited* nevertheless delivers a truly innovative format and a gorgeous, massive world populated by real people. Now get in and drive! ● **Gord Goble**

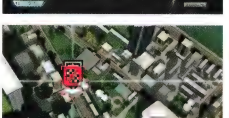
VERDICT

8/10

✚ **Transparent online multiplayer; stunning digital treatment of Hawaii.**

✖ **Can't manually alter your car; no night or rain; free-form play not for everyone.**

Games for Windows



● **Setting up the parameters for a 1-on-1 online challenge is as easy as scrolling around a map and placing icons. Then you're off to the races.**

TOP SPIN 2

Out of bounds

PUBLISHER: **2K Sports/Aspyr** DEVELOPER: **PAM/Indie Built** GENRE: **Sports** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-4 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

It's a classic, mildly depressing case of sloppy seconds: Xbox 360 tennis sim *Top Spin 2* arrives on the PC a full year after the debut of its console counterpart, with just enough tech issues to sour the experience for enthusiasts of the sport.

The game's content poses no problems; *au contraire,* no tennis game—on any platform—comes as close as *Top Spin 2* does to providing a near-perfect simulation of the real deal. The series' trademark career mode lets you take a custom-made character through a series of training exercises and progressively tougher tournaments, building various skills and attributes—RPG-style—and increasing his reputation as he climbs the corporate sponsorship ladder. Singles and doubles exhibition matches (versus virtual versions of two dozen real-life tennis pros) are available for those wanting a quick fix, and a trio of gimmicky party games—which seem a bit out-of-place on this PC port—provide middling multiplayer distractions.

The execution of these feature-rich modes ain't always so smooth, though. When you square off, expect a fair amount of choppiness as you bound across the court to return your opponent's lobs...and don't act too surprised when the controls lag just enough to sabotage an otherwise well-timed slice or tricky risk shot. The sluggishness isn't a complete deal-breaker—things get more enjoyable once you learn to compensate—but it holds this port back from the excellence of its console-powered cousin. Though *Top Spin 2*'s still the best PC tennis game in town, the herky-jerky gameplay makes us want to throw our e-rackets down in rage. ● **Ryan Scott**

● **Don't even *try* to play without a gamepad.**

VERDICT

+ Engaging career mode; intricate character customization; lots to do.

– Irritating performance where it hurts the most.

6\10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

WHEN YOU SQUARE OFF, EXPECT A FAIR AMOUNT OF CHOPPINESS AS YOU BOUND ACROSS THE COURT.

MAKING HISTORY: THE CALM & THE STORM

The Sedate Solo Play & the Better Online Battles

REVIEW

Muzzy Lane's theatrically titled *The Calm & The Storm* began its peculiar existence as—of all things—a turn-based World War II educational aid, replete with handouts, maps, discussion questions...even an instructor's guide. *The Calm & The Storm* "2.0" simply upticks and repackages that game for a broader audience; whether that audience includes you depends on your inclination to overlook tinny solo-play A.I. and chase down live opponents instead. The latter's pretty much the only reason to play this middling emulation of 80 nations feuding and politicking in five scenarios spanning 1936-1945.

Complexitywise, the game falls somewhere between Gary Grigsby's board game–style *World at War* and Paradox's RTS ('s' for spreadsheet) *Hearts of Iron II*. You play as one of eight nations nudging iconic troops, tanks, and planes around a 3D map of the globe carved into some 800 regions. Your military-industrial engine operates as a function of industrial production units (IPUs), in turn contingent upon regional resources like coal, metal, and oil. You win by drumming up "World Power" points for your nation, alliance, or ideology by boosting domestic metrics like labor size, industrial strength, and economics.

Trouble is, your computer opponents verge on comatose. Countries out-and-out boondoggle their economies, bulking with "light" units and little else. Alliances form, snap, then form again, reducing diplomacy to a game of tag. Armies fight out of supply, nations leave themselves unguarded when warring abroad. And losing once you've reasoned any of that out? Virtually impossible. In other words: Play with friends, wait for patches, or simply move along. ● **Matt Peckham**

● **The battle window distills all bonuses and unit proficiencies into a simple, intuitive "combat power" rating.**

VERDICT

+ Realism-grounded military-industrial mechanics; online play.

– First-class Artificial Unintelligence; hard to find online opponents.

6\10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

COUNTRIES OUT-AND-OUT BOONDOGGLE THEIR ECONOMIES, BULKING WITH "LIGHT" UNITS AND LITTLE ELSE.

While *IL-2* still looks pretty fabulous by today's standards, the anthology lets you optionally tweak the configuration file for improved cloud and water-surface effects.

IL-2 STURMOVIK: 1946

All of Oleg Maddox's Sturm-o-vik-in-a-box

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: 1C: Maddox Games/RRG Studios GENRE: Flight Simulation AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.direct2drive.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1.1GB hard drive space (flight stick recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-128 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

EDITOR'S CHOICE
Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

Call it a videogame if you dare: Oleg Maddox's *IL-2* series may be the most scrupulous survey of World War II planes in the history of the genre. If it's aeronautical fidelity you're after, *IL-2*'s the arm-chair aviator's Cadillac. Rip one of these puppies open and you can almost smell the burnt varnish off a hobbled German Focke-Wulf or catch the acrid tang of cordite bleeding through the dash of a bullets-spent P-51 Mustang. Think of *1946* as the mother lode. It wrestles everything from the original *IL-2 Sturmovik* through 2004's *Pacific Fighters* and 2006's *Pe-2* into one installation on a single DVD, then adds two brand-new expansions...all for an obscenely bargain-basement price of $30.

HYPOTHETICAL RUMBLE

The *1946* expansion asks: "What if the Allies botched Normandy, and the Soviets and Germans fought on?" Answer: a proper successor to LucasArts' 1990 game *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*. With *1946*, you basically get jets—and not just those that actually flew trivial endgame sorties. In addition to your German Me-262s, Arado Ar-234s (the world's first jet bomber), and He-162s, or Russian MiG-9s, MiG-13s, and Yak-15s, developer RRG pulled a few exotic "wonder weapons" off the table. Take the Heinkel Lerche II, a vertical takeoff and landing fighter/intercep-tor that looks like a finned rocket stuck through a giant fan. Or try the Horten Ho-IX, a batwing jet-glider that eerily resembles the U.S. B-2 stealth bomber and could tag speeds just shy of Mach 1. Oh yeah, ever wanted to strap wire-guided X-4 rockets on a 596-mph German Ta-183? Here's your chance.

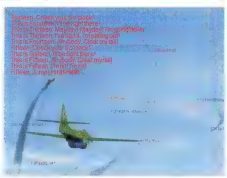
The new campaigns force you to slog through a few too many traditional planes before gradu-ating to the palm-rubbing speed demons, but the missions extrapolate from history logically and only stutter a bit in the Soviet VVS 46 cam-paign with a few noncombat A-to-Z yawners. Jets aren't prop planes, and turn-turn-turn aces will have to adjust to *1946*'s aerial jousting, but hav-ing these fascinating planes shoehorned in with 1C's trademark photo-real finishes cinches *1946*'s price, anthology or no.

OPERATION "AUGUST STORM"

Sturmoviks Over Manchuria, the other debut add-in, trots out the 1945 Russian IL-10, a bomb-toting, 2,000-horsepower beast of a ground-puncher that topped out 87 mph faster than the original IL-2 warhorse. After assisting in the final assault on Berlin—running recon dogfights and bombing artillery dugouts—you'll slingshot east to test this powerful Soviet hybrid against Japan's best in a harrowing campaign over northern China.

You also get a host of new Japanese planes like the speedy short-range Mitsubishi J2M5 "Raiden," four Nakajima Ki-series variants, and the Kawanishi N1K2-J "George" fighter-bomber with its automatic force-triggered flaps. The Japanese campaign leads off battling Hellcats over Iwo Jima and culminates in hair-raising defense runs scuppering U.S. B-29 raids over Japan.

1946 might as well be the holy grail of WWII flight sims, a platinum anthology of everything good about no-frills airborne scrimmaging. The new material's a deal, whether you own the ear-lier games or not. And if you don't, 30 bucks nets you something that—six years on—still outclasses everything else. **Matt Peckham**



Words can't describe the Heinkel Lerche II, but it's certainly wild pitching a couple squadrons of these VTOLs bristling with X-4s at just about anything.

VERDICT

- **The entire *IL-2* saga on one DVD (plus two brand-new expansions)—dirt cheap.**
- **No cons at all.**

10/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

ULTIMATE X STRIKER

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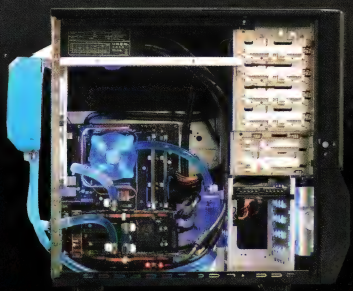
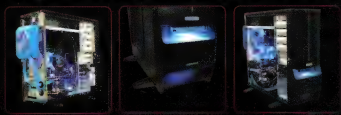


Stay cooler as your competition gets hotter!



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SAM & MAX: EPISODE 5—REALITY 2.0

So this dog and this rabbit walk into a chat room...

PUBLISHER: **Telltale Games/GameTap** DEVELOPER: **Telltale Games** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.gametap.com or www.telltalegames.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **3.0GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 240MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Downloadable**

REVIEW

If something seems a little off on Sam and Max's street, it's not just because the Internet is trying to enslave humanity through the global distribution of virtual-reality hypno-goggles. *Reality 2.0*—the penultimate chapter of the only successful attempt at "episodic games" to date—finds the freelance police in a *Tron*-ish (acceptable nerd shorthand for "filled with glowy 3D vectors") simulacrum of their own four-background world, complete with pitch-perfect 8-bit music. But computer humor is tough—especially when your audience probably uses computers *a lot*—and Sam and Max cast their satirical net a little too wide this time around.

Successfully skewered targets include Mario and MMORPGs (+2 swords and blue-slime grinding), and *Reality 2.0*'s shadow cult of obsolete computing machines number among the series' best supporting characters. But the pop-up-ad and visitor-counter jokes leave a mildly uncomfortable, out-of-touch sensation, not unlike a latter-day *Simpsons* episode trying to tackle "Internet" humor—as if this throwback to 1993 doesn't realize it's not 1999 anymore.

While most of the puzzles are reasonably obvious (within the *Sam & Max* system of cartoon logic), this is the first episode that had me resorting to the old "use every item in your inventory on every object in the game" methodology on one particular puzzle—a trying time for any adventure gamer, no matter how simple, silly, stupid, or insane the solution turns out to be.

But all transgressions are forgiven once you make it to *Episode 5*'s finale—a surprising, sparse, and spot-on little jaunt into "Reality 1.5" that'll likely stand as the series' landmark moment once it's bundled into a season. ● **Sean Molloy**

● In *Reality 2.0*, **we finally learn how many hit points Sam has.**

VERDICT

- ✚ **Ingenious end sequence; great-looking virtual-reality setting; awesome music.**
- ✚ **Some "Internet humor" lacks requisite funny; even shorter than usual.**

7/10 GOOD

Games for Windows

COMPUTER HUMOR IS TOUGH—ESPECIALLY WHEN YOUR AUDIENCE PROBABLY USES COMPUTERS *A LOT*.

MYST ONLINE: URU LIVE

What's Lara Croft doing in my adventure game?

PUBLISHER: **GameTap** DEVELOPER: **Cyan Worlds** GENRE: **Adventure-MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.gametap.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Live v3.511**

REVIEW

You don't know where you are, how you got there, or what you're supposed to do (and no, you're not tied down in front of Bravo's *Waterworld* marathon). It feels a whole lot like it did when *Myst* completely revamped the adventure genre in 1993.

When the essence of *Myst Online* was released about four years ago as *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, its online component felt by the wayside for a number of reasons. Primarily, it didn't work...it does now, though, and the result is a cacophony of mismatched elements.

The well-designed settings and puzzles are the game's real strengths, and even though technology's ramped up a whole lot in the last few years, the environments still look beautiful and whimsical enough to please. Your avatar, however, is clunky, ugly, and completely unmanageable—partly because of the rigidly structured camera angles, and partly because of the poorly integrated controls. You can key-map WASD, but it doesn't help. And perhaps the worst travesty is the need to leap—all too often—from surface to surface, over chasms and crevices, in order to achieve a particular goal. They're not, after all, planning to *Tomb Raider* fans here, right?

Even with multiplayer snarking, it still feels very odd in the nebulous neighborhoods (or "Ages") of Uru to encounter your cousin Dean on his headset. But if you are stuck in Negilahn ("Was ist das, Negilahn?"), other folks do come in handy.

Solid puzzle design and a real sense of story should captivate the true *Myst* fans, though, and a persistent world's capacity for overhaul and new content leaves the linking books' potential wide open. ● **Cindy Yans**

● **The *Myst* designers always had a thing for View-Master mode.**

VERDICT

- ✚ **Wonderful puzzles; good potential; relatively mature community space.**
- ✚ **Maddening navigation; "retro" beyond the point where retro feels "good."**

6/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

THE WELL-DESIGNED SETTINGS AND PUZZLES ARE THE GAME'S REAL STRENGTHS.

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER

Even in today's *World of WarCraft*–dominated climate, other quality MMOs manage to eke out a meager existence. Here are five you just might want to take a look at if you're burned out on good ol' Azeroth.

AUTO ASSAULT

The world doesn't end with a "bang" in NetDevil's *Auto Assault*—more like a post-apocalyptic whimper. It's almost prophetic that this damn fine *Road Warrior*–inspired MMO couldn't attract the audience it deserved. Within months, the entire game world collapsed into a lone, single server just so you could actually find other players. If you ever wanted to join an online convoy, now's the time.

FINAL FANTASY XI

When it comes to hardcore fantasy MMOs, this massively multiplayer behemoth of Square Enix's *Final Fantasy* console RPG franchise is king. Players choose from five cuddly races and six main classes (and two optional ones advanced classes) and explore a world teeming with lush ground, geographically and culturally distinct denizens. There are few things funnier in the world than seeing the words "Level Down" flash on your screen. SOE's Vanguard may be desperate to start game's inserting for a horrible, but rewarding MMO experience, but *Final Fantasy XI* filled that niche first.

EVE ONLINE

Behold: the only sci-fi MMO you'll ever need. More "virtual world" than "game," *Eve* puts the power in the players' hands through its free economy, region-based security levels (enter a low-sec area, and you're at the mercy of your fellow players), and real-time skill system (skills train even when you aren't logged on). It's one of the biggest time-sinks in the genre, and it certainly won't hold your hand when bad things happen...but if that's the kind of make-your-own-destiny experience you're looking for, *Eve*'s your new second life. It's digitally distributed (not sold in stores), so give it a whirl at www.eve-online.com.

EVERQUEST II

Compared to the rest of SOE's train wreck of an online game lineup (*Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*, *The Matrix Online*, and *Star Wars: Galaxies* jump immediately to mind), *EverQuest II* looks like a smokin'-hot supermodel. Yeah, the *EverQuest* setting's about as fresh as the 257th *Forgotten Realms* novel at this point, but *EQ2*'s a relatively friendly fantasy MMO (whose name isn't *World of WarCraft*) that doesn't suck—a genuine rarity these days.

CITY OF HEROES

You gotta hand it to Crypto studios. *City of Heroes* (and its follow up, *City of Villains*) As by the numbers as some of its competitors are games on the other. The opportunity to play a superhero—decked out with lots of fun powers, like flight, and to participate in a unique angle for an MMO, and the character-creation system is still second to none. Here's hoping Cryptic's upcoming Marvel Comics MMO builds on the foundation laid here.

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Extend

Where your games live on forever!

Bruce's skyscraper gets in the way of Tom's infantry attack.

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TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

COMMAND & CONQUER 3

Can all-American Bruce stop Comrade Tom's evil Brothers of Nod?

PUBLISHER **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER **EALA** GENRE **Real-Time Strategy** ESRB RATING **Teen**

Bruce is overrun by Tom's infantry, who are hopped up on Tiberium infusions and led by caped Confessors.

COLUMN

Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

The game is *Command & Conquer 3*. The map is Small Town U.S.A. The players are Bruce Geryk as the Global Defense Initiative and Tom Chick as the Brotherhood of Nod. The version is 1.03, which predates the "balance patch" Electronics Arts says it will release. (At press time, the patch was still pending.)

BRUCE: I love the idea of a "balance patch" that is announced before the game even works right. It's like EA figured the game would probably be unbalanced, but since everyone would be complaining about that stuff anyway, they'd reserve the right to balance the game sometime in the unspecified future. What they really need to patch is the online play. Tom and I were unable to get EA's online connection to work, so we had to use a program called Hamachi, which tricks the game into thinking it's playing over a LAN.

TOM: Hamachi is a great way to do an end run around botched game launches like this. For the first week or so after *C&C3* was released, I spent much of my time online downloading the latest patch that was supposed to get online play working. It was seriously eating into the bandwidth I needed to download patches for *Vanguard* and *The Lord of the Rings Online*.

BRUCE: We could have used something *C&C3* tries to install called GameSpy Comrade. But I flat-out refuse to use something called "Comrade." I mean, how neat would it be to call something "GameSpy Waffen SS?" Exactly. So I don't see why flaunting the whole "commie chic" thing is somehow acceptable.

TOM: I'm pretty good at *Command & Conquer 3*. Not supernaturally good. I wouldn't even make it past the qualifying trials for the World Cyberathlete Dorking Game League, or whatever competitions use EA's new BattleCast feature with its RTS Telestrator "OMG, I'm Drawing Lines on the Game!" Interface™. I'm barely even "I win online" good. But I can hold my own. For instance, I can win Internet arguments about whether Mammoth Tanks need to be nerfed. And I really like the game. I dig the pace, the focus, the variety of tactics, and even the cheesy artwork. I appreciate each side's unique twists. Unlike most people, I think the Scrin Mothership is a totally awesome unit, but you have to know the right way to use it. Hint: It isn't "Build the signal transmitter at your base and then wait for an hour while the mothership creeps across the map to the other guy's base." Buy me a beer sometime, and I'll tell you all about it.

BRUCE: Tom is the only person I know who talks about RTS tactics while out for beers. Make sure you never invite Tom out for beers.

TOM: The Scrin are my favorite race, but I don't want to freak Bruce out with a bunch of samey-looking bugs. There's nothing intuitive about which kinds of units are good against which bugs, much less which spiky crab-looking building you should blow up first when you attack a Scrin base. So I'll be Nod, which will let Bruce play the GDI (i.e., the good guys), and will also let him further indulge his fantasies of me as a menace to global peace, prosperity, and freedom.

BRUCE: Any readers who pay attention to the subtext of these Tom vs. Bruce encounters might find a few things interesting here. First, it's well known that the Brothers of Nod are a proxy for radical red communists—who, in this game, are played by Tom. Second, despite the fact that he knows that war is hell and fighting in *Command & Conquer* makes things blow up, Tom chose the map Small Town U.S.A. for us to fight over. I think that says more about Tom's worldview than any thousands of words he will shortly muster to deny everything I've shown to be undeniably true.

TOM: As Nod, there are all sorts of things I can do. If I want to be aggressive, I can rush with Scorpion Tanks, fitting them with dozer blades and laser capacitors, as if I were playing a ranked ladder >

game. I can raise an army of Fanatics to suicide-bomb Bruce into submission. The Venom Gunship spam is pretty popular. I can turtle behind some Obelisks of Light long enough to get a passel of Avatars with scavenged flamethrowers and Beam Cannons. Then there's the tactic of annoying and demoralizing your opponent with Shadow Teams, which I've already used against Bruce a few times.

BRUCE: In some practice games we tried, Tom used something I call (and which he secretly calls) the "*Red Dawn* Gambit." First, he builds a lot of those Russian superstealth units, and then he puts them in gliders and does an air assault on my base, blowing up all my power plants and maybe even a refinery. That cripples my buildup and takes my defensive structures offline. Then he invades out of Mexico. So this game, I'm getting smart. I'll build a couple of anti-infantry towers and put them inside my base. Next, I build extra power plants. Then I'll get a war factory and produce one of those radar vans that detect stealthy units. I think it's called a Sheepdog. Then I'll produce Sheepdogs non-stop and my base patrolling for red commandos. Oh, wait... you can't set patrol paths in *Command & Conquer 3*? That must be the "innovative design" part.

TOM: Actually, you can set a patrol path using the Ctrl-Z queuing, but it's not entirely clear. For the most part, *Command & Conquer 3* has finally gotten the interface right. It's been 10 years since Westwood invented the whole Command & Conquer & Blow Things Up a Whole Lot style of RTS, so it's nice to see an interface that finally does justice to the gameplay.

BRUCE: This is a good interface? Clicking back and forth through multiple tabs to find and then build and finally place the right building? *OK, Mr. Fancy-Pants Game Critic.*

TOM: While Bruce fumbles around with tabs and building placement and patrol paths, I'm on auto-pilot, going through a standard build order: crane and Emissary, then refinery and power plant, then refinery, then Hand of Nod, shift-click Militants, shift-click Militant Rocket Squads, then another refinery, make sure to get Saboteurs to the two nearby Tib spikes. For me, this is as simple as the opening moves of a chess game.

BRUCE: Tom is a real Ruy López. Here's how RTS games work against Tom: I build up a base, feel pretty good about myself, and then start to expand and find out Tom already owns the rest of the map. So this time, I'm going to send some infantry forward into Small Town U.S.A. so that Tom gets a proper appreciation for what America really thinks about invading red communists.

TOM: I'd normally grab the expansion Tiberium closer to Bruce, but there's really no need to be so aggressive. It's just Bruce. So I grab the one closest to my starting point. I suppose the tactic will be an infantry overrun. I drop my Secret Shrine and start researching the Tiberium infusion and Confessors.

BRUCE: I put a couple of squads into the central building, which I think is owned by State Farm Insurance and has a nice little food court in the basement. Sure enough, here comes Ivan Dragon and his assorted minions. I can almost hear Tom's trash talk about how he's going to replace all the fast-food restaurants with borscht counters. Oh, wait—that's his actual trash talk over Skype.

TOM: I take my time wrecking the big skyscraper in the middle of the map where Bruce has garrisoned his troops. My swarm of infantry covers for my Emissary, which drives past the firefight to deploy just short of Bruce's base. From here, I'll set up defenses and another Hand of Nod to continue pumping out infantry.

BRUCE: Tom sure has a lot of infantry. One thing I can never get right is how many units to build on a given map. We played one practice game where six infantry units were way too many at the beginning, and now Tom has what looks like 50. However, his Red HQ, or whatever that unfolding buggy was, got blown up. Jed Eckert for the win.

TOM: That was really uncool, and it's just going to draw the game out. We'd be out of here much sooner if Bruce's Missile Squad hadn't destroyed my Emissary. Plus, the Emissary was unarmed, so that means Bruce has killed civilians and lost the moral high ground as the "good guys."

BRUCE: Here's the thing: When you go into the *C&C3* multiplayer lobby, just after you see the chat from c0ffin4U and just before you lock up at the phantom OK box, you can see a bunch of games with names like "1v1 NO RUSHERS" or "casual game RUSH SUCKS." Which makes me sad because I'm listening to "Distant Early Warning" right now. Of course, what is Tom doing? Attacking me with about 1,000 Cuban parachutists and "missle" guys. Did you know that was how you spell that word? I never knew that until I joined the *C&C* game lobby.

TOM: I approach Bruce's starting Tiberium field with about 20 infantry squads. Time to kill his Harvesters. Unfortunately, he has the presence of mind to start throwing up Watchtowers, which are GDI's anti-infantry turrets. Fortunately, he throws up one too many and overtaxes his power supply, shutting them all down. I call this "pulling a California." Bruce's powerless Watchtowers give me time to concentrate on killing Harvesters.

BRUCE: Among the many other things you have to micromanage in this game, you have to worry about the electric utility. I'm surprised *C&C3* doesn't make you align all your transformers and build power lines. Actually, I'm not surprised at all—this kind of super-micromanagement is typical of the early RTS model, which treats it as an essential gameplay element. That's fine for some people—like, obviously, Tom—but not so much for me. Oooh, the power's back on....

TOM: I only kill one Harvester before Bruce solves his energy crisis. A ring of Watchtowers slaughters my initial rush, which I'll call the First Wave. I start pooling replacements around my approaching replacement Emissary. These guys will be the Second Wave.

BRUCE: More standard Tom strategy: Build a forward base, throw up some defensive structures, and harass me while his main base builds up. I can see it coming a mile away, but I can never stop it.

TOM: After the replacement Emissary deploys, I drop a Hand of Nod, a Shredder Turret, and a Laser Turret. They fight their automated turret wars with Bruce's Watchtowers.

BRUCE: As a simulation of World War I, *C&C3* is actually pretty good. You have a complete stalemate due to defensive systems being much better than offensive ones, until later on someone builds the new technology that breaks the deadlock but doesn't undo the previous horrible casualties.

TOM: That's actually a pretty canny observation of how *C&C3* works. If Bruce were to ever figure out the construction tabs and power bar and patrol-path queuing, he'd be a formidable opponent.

BRUCE: Right now, we're still in the stalemate phase thanks to Tom's regenerating gun towers.

TOM: Nod's turrets rebuild unless you destroy their control nodes. It's one of the subtle but important distinctions among the different factions. However, it's not really a stalemate phase, since I'm building up my economy while keeping Bruce boxed in. I've got five refineries raking in the Tiberium, so I'm not hurting for resources. I drop more turrets. Bruce is sending a few vehicles around my right flank, so I try to garrison some Rocket Militants in a nearby building. But an APC keeps chewing them up before they can reach the building. Eventually, my Laser Turrets clear the way.

BRUCE: Unless I can keep blowing up the control nodes for Tom's turrets, this is going to take forever. Unfortunately, I only just now reached a second supply of Tiberium, so clearing my economic bottleneck will take some time. My guess is, I don't have that much time.

TOM: Time to send in my Second Wave. My target is Bruce's lone surviving Harvester.

BRUCE: Right cue: another wave of rushing infantry. Tom is a rusher! Take that, Geddy Lee. Sorry I had to use the Rush joke twice.

TOM: As an Old-School RTS Wonk, I find it amusing how the term "rush" is used these days. It used to mean the tactic whereby you break your starting economy to mount an early attack. But now it's synonymous with any attack that overwhelms another player's defense, no matter how late it happens in the game. Technically, that's not a rush. We can talk more about this when you buy me a beer and I'm explaining that thing about the Scrin Mothership. Anyway, it looks like the Second Wave is also going to be the Last Wave. They've killed the Harvester, destroyed the defending Watchtowers, and are now knocking over Bruce's refineries. I've got a couple of Beam Cannons out who start working their way around the right while my swarm of infantry does a sweep to the left.

BRUCE: That may sound like the rudiments of a tactical problem, but it isn't—Tom is just getting fancy with his mob of units. The funny thing is that the tactical A.I. is actually pretty good at figuring out which units to shoot at. The problem is not only having enough units, but having the right types of units. You'd have to give me another month to figure all that out.

TOM: My infantry swarm is besieging Bruce's Construction Yard. They finish it off while a pair of Beam Cannons destroy his Command Post. It was a fairly short game. I think it takes more time for the green EA logo to load when *C&C3* starts than it took for us to finish our game.●

FINAL SCORE

TOM WINS. DUH.

In the August issue:

The People's Choice edition of Tom vs. Bruce!

We get a lot of requests along the lines of "How come you've never done *StarCraft*?" Which we have, but never mind. So the month after next, we're doing Tom vs. Bruce: The People's Choice. E-mail tomvsbruce@gmail.com to vote for the game you'd like to see us do. *The Sims 2: Pets? M.U.L.E.?* Maybe *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, or some more *World of WarCraft*? It's your call. E-mail tomvsbruce@gmail.com.

UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

• My axemen here used to be the local bullies...until I sent them to "borrow" some gold from the local barbarians and discovered that they had a new pet.

CIVILIZATION IV MODS APLENTY!

From historical realism to virtual surrealism

GENRE: **Turn-Based Strategy** WEBSITE: **http://forums.civfanatics.com/downloads.php?do=file&id=2211 (*Dale's Combat Mod* v1.03); http://forums.civfanatics.com/downloads.php?do=file&id=177 (*Rhye's and Fall of Civilization* v195); http://forums.civfanatics.com/downloads.php?do=file&id=1 (*Fall From Heaven II* v0.21)**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.7GB hard drive space, *Civilization IV***

MOD ROUNDUP

Two years after *Civilization IV*'s official release, the cool mods from dedicated fans are still rolling in. Here are three particularly good ones for the core game that you should try out.

DALE'S COMBAT MOD

Traditional *Civ* combat consists of units fighting each other one-on-one—you order a unit to attack, and the game picks the best available defender to pair off against your guy. But in *Dale's Combat Mod*, you can get the whole combined-arms thing going. Simply form a stack of units; when they attack, they work together, with your melee units trying to take the brunt of the damage, your cavalry trying to outflank your opponents, and so on...right down to the air support.

Even better, though, is the added ability to bombard at range. One of *Civ IV*'s odd quirks is that cannons are, well, cannon fodder. You always need to suicide your siege units into the enemy so that the collateral damage they inflict enables your other units to win. With *Dale's Combat Mod*, your siege units can cause collateral damage from a distance without actually attacking, keeping them safe behind the lines and restored to their normal strategic role. Personally, I like these changes so much that whenever I try to play without them, combat just seems broken—like my world's no longer progressing the way it should or something.

RHYE'S AND FALL OF CIVILIZATION

Speaking of the world progressing as it should, that's the whole purpose of the *Rhye's and Fall of Civilization* mod by Rhye (who gets bonus points for the clever mod name). *Rhye's* focuses on simulating the actual history of civilization on Earth. For instance, if you play as Rome, you won't get to start playing until the year of Rome's actual founding...at which point you find yourself dropped into the Mediterranean world next to the well-established empires of Egypt and Greece.

New civilizations being "born" like this can really throw twists into a game. Like, for instance, when the Arabs first come on the scene. Their sudden surge in power can strain nearby civilizations to the point of toppling—or possibly not. What if the Arabs ran into an intact, aggressive Rome that had managed to conquer everything from Spain to India? *Rhye's* turns fanciful speculations like this into intriguing possibilities for your next session.

Other features that round out the "Earth sim" concept: scripted barbarian uprisings, plagues, and A.I. that correctly names cities based on their historical location. Realism: achieved!

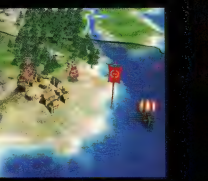
FALL FROM HEAVEN II

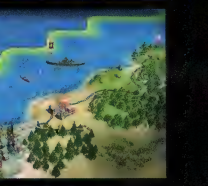
Then again, reality bites! Who cares about real-world events when you can just slay Orcs instead? Well, that's exactly what you get to do in *Fall From Heaven II*, which morphs *Civ IV* into a dark fantasy realm complete with plenty of well-written (although still patchy) background fiction to set the scene.

> REALITY BITES! WHO CARES ABOUT REAL-WORLD EVENTS WHEN YOU CAN JUST SLAY ORCS INSTEAD?

You can research arcana along with technology and get all sorts of new units to match: conjurers, elementals, and Dwarven cannons, just to name a few. *Fall From Heaven II* puts heavy emphasis on unit experience and promotion, RPG-style...and, of course, the leaders you can choose to play as cover all the usual fantasy varieties, ranging from vampires to Elf chicks.

Fall From Heaven II adds so much content and introduces so many new concepts (such as heroes that gain experience with every turn, technology-tree specialization, and the direct association of religion with alignment) that you might as well be playing a whole new *Civ*-like game for free. Now if they'd only incorporate *Dale's Combat Mod*, I probably wouldn't play anything else for months. • **Matthew Chase**





• If that helicopter flies any lower, it just might cut the heads off those unsuspecting marines!

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is GFW's resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

All those research teams working on the best possible interface for board-gamey computer war games can stop now: The boys from Down Under did it again. SSG's *Battlefront* proves once again that if you take an old-school war-game design and build a great interface around it, you're most of the way to having a darn good game.

The question is, what about the new school? Awhile back, I asked SSG's Gregor Whiley about the company's attitude toward new mechanics in board games—using *We the People* as an example—since they've obviously mastered the older ones. Whiley responded:

"I haven't played *We the People*, but [SSG designer] Ian Trout has. I'm sure that if it had ideas that were useful, then they would have been part of the design somehow. Steps and overruns have been used for 30 years because they work. What I think is more important is the way we've been able to add to the basic step concept in our *Decisive Battles* series with things like timed replacements and refit rules, which allow us more scope to differentiate between the capabilities of different sides.... Subtle power is what we like to see in our game mechanics—simple rules with lots of different outcomes."

● ***Battlefront* brings the British 1st Airborne at Market Garden...**

● **...along with the German Afrika Korps at Gazala.**

Battlefront demonstrates this subtle power very well. But you can only get so far with 30-year-old mechanics, which is probably why it leaves me a bit cold. How thrilling would it be to see these great designers use their talents to devise new tools—instead of refining old ones?

Get *Battlefront* at www.matrixgames.com. ●

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

PopCap's habit of appending "Deluxe" to all its new games befuddles me. If this is the first iteration of something, isn't it—by definition—the baseline? Shouldn't only subsequent, expanded versions of a game get the "Deluxe" moniker? But my befuddlement's passed, thanks to PopCap's latest game, *Peggle Deluxe*. It's all so clear to me now: "Deluxe" doesn't refer to the game, but to its life-consuming potential. With that in mind, *Peggle Deluxe* might be better titled *Peggle Deluxe Extreme Super Dynamite*. Download this front-runner for Casual Game of the Year at your own peril.

At first glance, *Peggle* doesn't look too promising; it's a strange hybrid of pachinko and PopCap's own *Zuma*, with the cutesiness of *Bonnie's Bookstore*. Seriously. Your job in *Peggle* is to shoot a little ball into a field of pegs, with every peg the ball strikes being cleared from the field once your ball's done ricocheting. Every field has about 20 orange pegs that you must eliminate before you run out of balls. It's just that simple.

What's not so simple: how insanely hypnotic and addictive *Peggle* is. Two levels into the Adventure mode, you'll be irrevocably hooked and trying to recall all that high school geometry you thought you'd never need, just so you can line up a perfect shot. As the peg fields grow more challenging, the game compensates by giving you increasingly effective power-ups like multiballs, fireballs, or a Zen ball that plans your shot for you.

As good as the Adventure mode is, the meat of the game lies in the Challenge mode, which throws down 70 increasingly wicked and irresistible gauntlets. Can you beat three consecutive master-level A.I. opponents in Duel mode? (Yes, it's got multiplayer, too.) How about amassing 1 million points in just three levels? These challenges keep the game fun long after you've run through Adventure mode three or four times. Skip the demo and give in to the inevitable—you can pick up *Peggle Deluxe* for a mere $20 online at www.popcap.com. ●

● ***In Peggle*, unlike real life, flaming balls are a *good* thing.**

PEGGLE IS A STRANGE HYBRID OF PACHINKO AND POPCAP'S OWN *ZUMA*, WITH THE CUTESINESS OF *BONNIE'S BOOKSTORE*. SERIOUSLY.

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

This month: *Guild Wars*

COLUMN

Ryan Scott

GFW reviews editor Ryan Scott eagerly awaits the day when *Guild Wars* players and demons can coexist peacefully.

Anyone who's read my extraordinarily positive reviews of the two most recent *Guild Wars* games (*Factions*, August 2006; *Nightfall*, January 2007) knows that I'm a big fan of the series, and although the 660-plus hours I've clocked since the original game's April 2005 launch may look insignificant to the *really* hardcore players out there, it's still no small chunk of time. And during those 660-plus hours—particularly since delving into the high-end areas of last year's *Guild Wars: Nightfall*—I've begun to see some of the game's warts for what they are.

My biggest beef with *Nightfall*: the Realm of Torment, a late-game region that hosts the campaign's final series of story missions. Now, with a name like "the Realm of Torment," one probably shouldn't expect a cakewalk, but the odds in some of this region's instanced areas take *Guild Wars* from fun to excruciatingly aggravating. The place is choked with high-level demon monsters, clustered together in massive groups with overlapping patrol paths; simply *getting anywhere* can seem near impossible when any move you make inevitably attracts the attention of 10 or more angry demons. That would be bad enough, except that—once they run low on health—these monsters employ the Call to the Torment skill, which (if left unchecked) causes the creature using it to reproduce, undercutting whatever progress you've made.

One *Nightfall* experience that sticks in my memory is a quest titled "Faded Memory." Now, getting the quest in the first place necessitated trekking from one end of a monster-infested zone to the other, just to talk to the quest-giver. After an hour of slogging through mountains of demons, I finally reached him. "Slay Flesh Gluttons," the quest text stated. "You have 5 of 5 left to kill." Simple enough, right? Following the quest marker on my minimap, I saw that the first of these five quest goals resided within a cave practically overflowing with Torment demons and titans (which always spawn two *tougher* monsters *every time you kill them*). I already knew where this was headed.

Yep...just another typical day in the Realm of Torment.

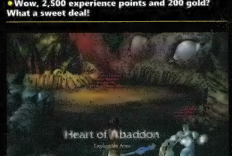
10 SECONDS UNTIL RESPAWN

I waded through the mess of demons, sent my heroes and henchmen in to kill the healers (always kill the healers first), and wound up dead in short order. But, hey, I managed to kill *one* of them. I respawned at a healing shrine (with a minus-15 percent death penalty to my health and energy), ran all the way back, and repeated the process. I soon bottomed out at minus-60 percent, at which point my group began dying too fast to take out a demon before it reproduced (courtesy of Call to the Torment). Now, every time I ran back and engaged the demons, they just multiplied. *That* was an hour and a half well spent, eh?

Frustrated, I glanced at the quest window again, noting the reward of 2,500 experience points and 200 gold—the same boilerplate prize that even *Nightfall*'s *earliest* quests offer. I decided it wasn't worth it and logged out, defeated... and bitterly wishing that *Guild Wars* employed a difficulty curve instead of a difficulty cliff.

Hence, the root of my problem: *Nightfall* spikes in difficulty once you reach the Realm of Torment and offers no attractive rewards to justify the repeated hikes through brutal, monster-clogged gauntlets. Here, challenge itself is an illusion—it's as if the people who put these zones together said, "We can't think of anything fun to include, so let's just drop a ton of overpowered monsters in and call it a day." Maybe some players enjoy that type of thing...or maybe they've learned to love their captor just a *little* too much, and they don't want to compromise their hundreds-plus hours of *Guild Wars* time by admitting that the game treats them like an abused spouse.

Wow, 2,500 experience points and 200 gold? What a sweet deal!



I haven't seen the new Hard Mode yet, but I don't even want to think about what this area will look like.

> I LOGGED OUT, DEFEATED...AND BITTERLY WISHING THAT *GUILD WARS* EMPLOYED A DIFFICULTY CURVE INSTEAD OF A DIFFICULTY CLIFF

SOUND OFF

Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast

ROUND TABLE

XTRAS

GFW RADIO
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

THE CREW

Got podcast comments? Hit the GFW message boards at boards.1UP.com, or send us feedback via e-mail at gfwletters@ziffdavis.com.

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Every week, the editors of *GFW* toss aside their inhibitions on *GFW Radio*, a podcast (it's like a magazine, only talked!) dedicated to what we love and loathe in the computer-gaming world. Subscribe at podcasts.1UP.com or the all-powerful iTunes Music Store. Want a sample of the hijinks? Here's a conversation around the office inspired by a recent podcast.

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: Is Games for Windows Live Gold worth the $50?

DARREN: On the Xbox, Live makes sense because it brings to consoles what PC gamers enjoyed for years. The difference is that now Microsoft is trying to sell ice to Eskimos. We've got to pay for the privilege of doing what we already do online. I think the real question here is what the hell am I getting for $50—besides Achievement points?

SEAN: For nonconsole gamers, the perception right now is I'm getting...*Shadowrun* and a 2-year-old Xbox game. That hasn't changed since we were calling this Live Anywhere. And apparently, FASA—developer of *Shadowrun*—is being shut down once they finish the game. Excitement mounts.

Then again, gamers have proven they can alter their opinions en masse at the drop of a hat. All it took was a couple of carrots in the form of Home and *LittleBigPlanet* at GDC to turn the PS3's PR tide—and, hey, whaddaya know—my local Target was suddenly sold out of the contraptions. Temporarily, maybe, but the moment was real.

JEFF: Remember way back when Ricky Gervais had the best podcast in the whole history of the universe? But then he got all greedy and started charging for it. And as soon as he did, I and a whole lotta other people stopped listening to it.

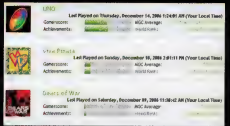
Moral: You can't charge people for what they're used to getting for free. I had this same discussion with my wife the other night. Even if it only works out to pennies a week, I'm going to resent it.

SHAWN: But you already subscribe to Xbox Live, which means you're not paying a penny more....

JEFF: Oh, sure—way to throw that in my face! That's not the point! Well, maybe it is. But still! I'm speaking out on behalf of my perhaps less-fortunate PC gaming brethren who do not subscribe, because I'm a man of the people that way.

SHAWN: I get that. I just wanted to make the case that, on the other hand, Microsoft is hoping to add PC gaming to its console-owners' repertoire.

SEAN: What did J. J. Richards say in your interview (pg. 46)? Seventy percent of Xbox Live subscribers play PC games? That sounds out of whack to me—maybe they're counting everyone who's ever booted up *Solitaire*—but then again, I'm no statistician. I hear you can do all sorts of magic with math if you try real hard. Speaking of *Solitaire*, I wonder if that'll wind up being the secret backdoor to this thing's success. Well, not *Solitaire* specifically. But the little games—PopCap kinda stuff that doesn't have a "robust online multiplayer infrastructure package" in place, but could fairly easily if it just hooked into Microsoft's tools. Maybe we're looking for the big dogs when we really should be looking at the sneaky little Chihuahuas.



Would you pay for the privilege of earning Xbox Live–style Achievement points on your PC?

DARREN: You're onto something here. In fact, did you guys hear that out of all the stuff that's been selling on Xbox Live, the first game to sell over a million copies is...wait for it...*Uno*! That's crazy. Maybe *Uno will* open that floodgate. God help us.

SEAN: How many times has *Peggle* come up in a conversation now on our podcast?

JEFF: NOT NEARLY ENOUGH. *PEGGLE* PWNZ YOU.

SEAN: And would you pay $50 a year if, suddenly, you were able to receive *Peggle* Achievements? Baker's Dozen: 20 points for hitting 13 blue pegs in a row. Peg Pythagoras: 25 points for knocking out a perfect right triangle. Answer honestly, now....

JEFF: Sadly, I think I would. Well, if you add maybe a couple of more *Peggle*-like games to that mix. I mean, how about *Minesweeper* Achievements? Or maybe just even Windows Achievements. I Alt-Tabbed back and forth from my game twice without crashing: 50 points! I'm sold.

RYAN: And while we're awarding ourselves imaginary Achievements, I just earned 100 points for having the last word in this discussion!

ADVERTISER INDEX

Casual Corner

Past games, present tense

Human nature's a funny thing.

I purchased a new PC in order to take advantage of the massive improvements offered by Microsoft Windows Vista®, including the hot new Enhanced for Windows Vista games, such as **Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved**. They look great, they play great, and they're a lot of fun—but here's the thing: For some reason, I found that with my new equipment, I couldn't wait to check out how some of my old favorites played.

"What?!" I hear you say. "You spent how much on a new PC, with faster speed, improved graphics, Enhanced for Windows Vista games, and one of the first things you did was start playing older games?"

What can I say? Go buy a new PC yourself, and it won't be long until you need to find out how well your longtime favorites hold up. It's just human nature.

What kicked off this classic-game retrospective was the need to prepare for my usual Saturday-night poker game over at my friend Barry's house. After splurging for a new PC, I knew that I couldn't afford to lose any more cash that week, so I went to MSN Games® (http://games.msn.com) to download **Poker Superstars II** for a quick warm-up session.

I usually play in amateur mode when I'm just trying to relax and win, but since I needed to be on my toes for the evening, I entered **Poker Superstars II** at the Superstar level and faced off against the likes of Johnny Chan, David Sklansky, and Todd Brunson, playing tournament-style Texas Hold 'Em. If I could hold my own against these guys, my poker buddies didn't stand a chance!

Since **Poker Superstars II** looked great on the 24-inch monitor I purchased with my Windows Vista machine, I decided to start rolling out some of my other favorites, beginning with **AstroPop**—a hypercolorful block-blasting, space-themed puzzler that looks incredible on the larger screen. The action heats up pretty fast as you juggle blocks, power-ups, and space pirates while you work to unlock all four of the unique characters in an effort to uncover the interlocking story. It's fun, fast, and wild!

After that, it was a whirlwind of checking out game after game, from exciting PC download games (such as the beautiful tropical-island matching game, **Galapago**, and the virtual fish tank, **Fish Tycoon**) to some of my free online favorites (such as the magical fantasy matcher, **Magic Match**, and, of course, the classic **Hexic**). That's the great thing about getting new equipment—it makes all the familiar games feel fresh and new again.

Playing **Fish Tycoon** led to other fish games, such as the always diverting **Feeding Frenzy**, and more matching fun with **Big Kahuna Reef**. Another game that I was delighted to rediscover: **Insaniquarium**, another virtual aquarium where fish drop money when you feed them and occasionally get attacked by aliens; the name of the game describes it perfectly.

Since sitting down early in the afternoon to warm up for my poker night, I'd managed to while away most of it. A quick look at the clock confirmed that I had only 20 minutes before I needed to jump in the shower and head out the door.

That meant just enough time to check out one more game—but this time I chose one I hadn't played before—**Mystery Case Files: Ravenhearst**.

MCF: Ravenhearst is one of the latest additions to the relatively new category of Search & Find games. These games present you with several different scenarios in which you need to locate specific items within densely packed images.

In **MCF: Ravenhearst**, you play a master detective who's trying to unlock the dark secrets of Ravenhearst Manor. It's a rich, visually compelling gothic mystery wherein you scour 32 separate rooms for cleverly hidden items and secrets to reveal the estate's unsettling history. There are diabolical clues to unravel that trigger Rube Goldberg–like devices for unlocking doors and jigsaw puzzles, which, when completed, expose lost diary entries. Not a bad way to spend 20 minutes, I figured.

I looked up when my phone rang.

"Hey, where're you at?" It was Barry.

"Getting ready to head out," I tell him.

"Don't bother," he says. "We're just getting ready to call it a night."

I looked at my clock—it was after midnight.

I mumbled an apology and hung up the phone.

After midnight! I should probably just go to bed.

On second thought, midnight was the perfect time for sinking into the dark secrets of **MCF: Ravenhearst**. Go to bed? Nah, stay up and play some more. I mean, it's just human nature.

And I've got to tell you—it looked absolutely stunning on my new 24-inch monitor.

–Andy Peterson, MSN Games

AstroPop for Windows Vista™

Poker Superstars II for Windows Vista™

XP-rience the

Classic gaming made easy with Windows Vista

As if awe-inspiring Games for Windows® titles like **Halo® 2** and **Shadowrun™** and the revolutionary DirectX® 10 showpiece **Microsoft® Flight Simulator X** aren't enough, PC enthusiasts have yet another irresistible reason to upgrade to the Windows Vista™ operating system.

Think hundreds upon hundreds of compatible diversions for Microsoft Windows XP, all of which are worth revisiting—and offer countless hours of amusement for both casual and hardcore players. Simply put, no other platform offers as much entertainment value for the money...or as wide a selection.

"We've hand-tested over 1,000 individual Windows XP games on Windows Vista to help ensure that everything runs smoothly for end users," says Chris Donahue, group manager, Games for Windows. "In addition, the more popular and commercially successful the title, the higher up it is on our list. We're pulling out all the stops so that shoppers can buy with confidence, knowing that they'll be able to enjoy not only an all-new range of eye-opening diversions, but also treasured classics."

Mike Gamble, lead program manager for Games for Windows, further admits that testing untold numbers of best-selling games from the last five to 10 years hasn't been an easy task. But it's one the Games for Windows team has undertaken with relish, he explains, as die-hard fans of the hobby themselves.

What's more, software-compatibility success rates have also been higher than ever when upgrading to a new Microsoft operating system, meaning that there's no sense in letting old favorites sit around, collecting dust. The vast majority of the time, he says, if you already own a title for Windows XP, it's good to go on Windows Vista right out of the box. And, more often than not, any minor errors you may encounter are easily fixable by running through a simple set of tests designed to ensure a seamless and enjoyable next-generation gaming experience.

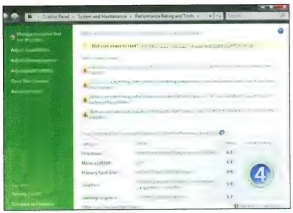
Granted, we're all waiting with bated breath for titles that take full advantage of Windows Vista and its bar-raising capabilities, such as **Crysis™** and **BioShock™**. But it just goes to show that it doesn't mean having to sit idly by in the meantime, with awesome amusements—including **Age of Empires® III: The WarChiefs** and **Rise of Nations®: Rise of Legends**—already available. Long story short: No matter how many nights you've already spent entranced by timeless hits or the extent of a recent system upgrade, it's easy to get right back in the game.

Your computer can run Windows Vista
Based on our scan of your system, Windows Vista Home Premium appears to be the best edition for you. For information about other editions, click the edition names in the left pane.
Ultimate
Home Premium
Business
Home Basic
Windows Vista Home Premium is the preferred edition of Windows for home desktops and mobile PCs. Home Premium makes it easy to enjoy digital photos, music, TV, and movies while providing a whole new level of security and reliability. You can upgrade to Windows Vista Home Premium and keep your files, settings and programs. If you use your home computer for work, consider Windows Vista Ultimate to combine the best business and entertainment experiences available.
Parental Controls
Windows Photo Gallery
Windows Aero with Flip3D
Windows Media Center
Windows Update and Ease
Read below for important installation and system upgrade information:
System Requirements
There are no known system issues preventing you from upgrading to Windows Vista.
See details
Devices

1 If you're currently running Windows XP and considering upgrading to Windows Vista, start by downloading the **Windows Vista Upgrade Advisor**, available free from **Microsoft.com**. Once installed on your PC, run the program to not only confirm whether your system meets the minimum specifications for the edition of Windows Vista you want, but also detect potential device or program issues. Capable of identifying software that meets either Works with Windows Vista or Certified for Windows Vista requirements, it's the easiest way to spot potential stumbling blocks.

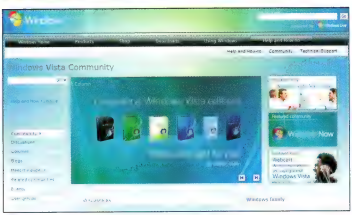
2 Next, breeze by **GamesForWindows.com** to learn more about Games for Windows–branded titles, which are guaranteed to work on Windows Vista. Additionally, there is a library of older or nonbranded titles you can also read about. You can search for games by title, genre, age group, or ESRB rating. As an added bonus, you can also access extra content like screenshots, trailers, and playable demos. There's even an option to browse user-created reviews, so you can be sure any given title's the right fit for yourself or your family.

Magic



3 The unique system configuration you use is a crucial part of the PC gaming experience: As Gamble explains, "The majority of compatibility issues are hardware-specific." Take time to check components' viability with Windows Vista by visiting **http://winqual.microsoft.com/hcl/Default.aspx**. Always make sure you have the latest drivers for your devices (e.g., soundcards, videocards, or game controllers) by skimming manufacturers' websites as well. Driver updates are made available for free download on a regular basis, and keeping them up to date is by far the simplest way to help ensure the most reliable, highest-quality gaming experience across the board.

4 In the **Games Explorer**, accessible right from the **Start** menu, compare your PC's prowess with the minimum and recommended requirements listed for each title by gauging its **Windows Experience Index** against these scores. If this numerical representation of your system's brawn—quickly referenced by typing "Perform" (without quotes) into the **Search Bar** and selecting **Performance Information and Tools**—exceeds these figures, you're good to go. If not, a system upgrade is needed. Also important to note: You can always improve game performance by running amusements in full-screen vs. windowed mode, which puts less drain on your graphics card.



5 Finally, check the game publisher's website to see if the title has been tested with Windows Vista and search for patches and updates. These complimentary fixes and improvements, issued as needed by game creators, cost nothing to retrieve and vastly enhance digital diversions' performance. Also, be sure to compare notes with fellow enthusiasts by scanning blogs, online newsgroups, and Internet forums, which Donahue calls "a monstrously powerful resource." Happily, accessing all is as easy as bringing up the **Games Explorer** and clicking on developer or publisher links, or the **Community and Support** tab.

Additional Hints and Tips

- Be sure to double-check **Parental Controls** to confirm the user account you're utilizing has permission to install and access any given game.
- If you have a question, don't be afraid to ask—dozens of outlets staffed by knowledgeable users like the **Windows Vista Community** stand ready to help.
- Look for titles bearing the Games for Windows logo—products with this marker don't just work on both Windows XP and Windows Vista. They also offer premium-quality PC gaming content.

So what are you waiting for? Between a massive back catalog and huge variety of upcoming hits, it's obvious: Playing with Windows Vista means playing to win.

Play It Again, Sam

Windows XP titles enjoy new life on Windows Vista™

Face facts: Between work, family life, and occasional brushes with that mysterious realm called "the outdoors," you've missed some first-rate gaming goodness recently.

Thankfully, as mentioned earlier, plenty of Windows XP diversions you may have overlooked are well worth revisiting—each ready to run on the Windows Vista operating system. Here are five top-quality titles we recommend:

Title: **The Sims™ 2** From: **Electronic Arts**
ESRB Rating: **Teen—Crude Humor, Mild Violence, Sexual Themes** URL: **www.ea.com**

Thanks to multiple expansion packs ranging from Seasons (introducing seasonal activities/weather) to Pets (adding dogs, cats, and other furry friends), the best-selling PC game ever continues to amaze and delight. A virtual dollhouse filled with little computer people whose everyday lives play out right on your monitor, the outing's not only equally popular with men and women...it's also one of the first titles to be simultaneously so accessible as to enthrall beginners, yet also deep enough to keep hardcore gamers glued to their keyboard for entire weeks on end.

Title: **Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** From: **Rockstar Games**
ESRB Rating: **Mature—Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Strong Language, Strong Sexual Content, Use of Drugs**
URL: **www.rockstargames.com**

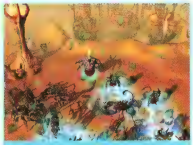
A throwback to the crime-riddled world of early-'90s urban America, this free-form ode to "gangsta" culture sees players hit the streets and build a criminal empire from the ground up. Spanning an entire state's worth of territory and letting you take on missions and assemble a gang at your leisure, it's essentially your chance to live the hip-hop music video. Granted, the game's ultraviolent fusion of action and adventure is inappropriate for children. As brushes with life's darker side go, though, it's never felt so good to be bad.

Title: **Call of Duty® 2** From: **Activision**
ESRB Rating: **Mature—Blood, Mild Language, Violence**
URL: **www.activision.com**

Less PC game, more gut-wrenching depiction of World War II, the current contender doesn't put you behind the controls of a must-see first-person blaster so much as throw you, shivering, onto the front lines. From Germany to North Africa, take the fight to Hitler's goons using guns and grenades, struggling for supremacy during raging conflagrations and wintry snowstorms where death's just a stone's throw away. Put simply, it's the closest you'll come to putting your life on the line short of enlisting—and must be seen in stomach-churning action to be believed.

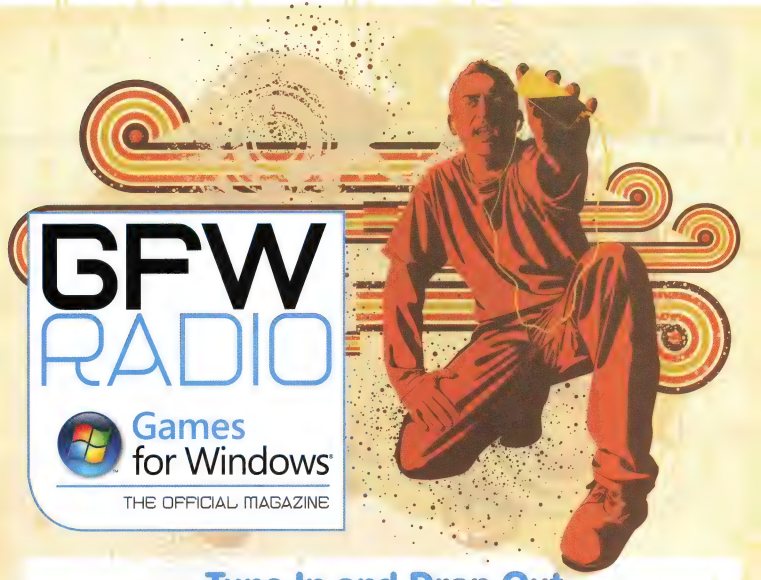
Title: **The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion®** From: **Bethesda Softworks**
ESRB Rating: **Mature—Blood and Gore, Language, Sexual Themes, Use of Alcohol, Violence** URL: **www.bethsoft.com**

One of the deepest fantasy role-playing adventures ever, this sweeping tale's a perfect fit for anyone who dreams of becoming a mighty wizard or warrior. Completely open-ended, yet also packing an engrossing storyline surrounding a peaceful kingdom's invasion by demons, its massive scope never ceases to amaze. This isn't just the type of title where you're free to customize a hero ad nauseam. It's also the sort that guarantees you'll continue to discover trap-riddled caves or ruins teeming with monsters and hidden treasure even months after first taking up the quest.



Title: **Rise of Nations®: Rise of Legends** From: **Microsoft**
ESRB Rating: **Teen—Blood and Gore, Violence**
URL: **www.microsoft.com**

Might and magic collide in the fiercest, most jaw-dropping real-time strategy romp ever to grace desktop and notebook screens. Enter a battle-scarred realm where mysticism and technology coexist in uneasy harmony and massive armies culled equally from imagination and folklore pit mechanical weapons against mythical beasts for ultimate dominion. Capable of testing your wits and reflexes, the game—a favorite with both critics and consumers—doesn't just offer multiple story-driven campaigns. It also packs a massive graphical and gameplay punch, ensuring no two outings are ever the same.



Tune In and Drop Out

GFW Radio broadcasting weekly from a digital device near you.

Imagine the sharpest minds in PC gaming sitting around every week, discussing everything from *World of WarCraft* to the impact of Vista to Game X's beta release. No holds barred—every sacred cow spitted and roasted, every lame game exposed, every great title championed. It'd be really cool—like the Algonquian Round Table of Gaming or something, right? In a perfect world, you'd get that. Instead, the editors of *Games for Windows* deliver an aural hour of musings, ponderings, and cognitive flatulence in the totally original *Games For Windows* podcast. Every week. As close as your computer. Tune in today!

Here's what some of our listeners are saying on the message boards…

"The GFW podcast has got to be one of the most consistently hilarious things that I have ever heard!"
–Solo 327

"Kudos on a very entertaining podcast, and I look forward to my next long drive, which will give me a chance to listen to the two most recent podcasts."
–Gigity

"I don't even really play PC games anymore, but this is still one of my favorite podcasts. For some reason, Shawn's "nerd/geek" voice never, ever gets old. Please continue to do that voice for many, many years."
–mmlemay

Tech

Awesome things in small packages

THE INCREDIBLE SHRIN

INSIDE

REVIEW
Take Note
We take two notebooks for a serious test drive. Are they ready to play?
96

DORK
Gladstoned
Think you got what it takes to run a successful game developer? Time to prove it!
97

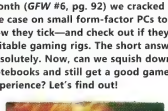
Every few years, we dream about cramming a full desktop gaming experience into a notebook computer. Just imagine it: a fully equipped gaming rig that weighs less than most people's monitors. What keeps getting in the way? Progress—there's the rub. Your standard-issue desktop PC can change with the times. Just pop in the latest gee-whiz card du jour and you're caught up. Notebooks haven't been able to make that claim—at least not yet.

Nevertheless, progress isn't exactly standing still for notebooks. While going toe-to-toe with desktops remains out of reach, the differences between them—both in power and in price—shrink every day. It's now possible to get a notebook with at least *some* upgradeability and minimal compromise. ●**Joe Rybicki**

SHRINHAGE

The ongoing saga of the incredible shrinking machine:

What's up with this little fella? He's here as a reminder that last month (*GFW* #6, pg. 92) we cracked open the case on small form-factor PCs to see how they tick—and check out if they are suitable gaming rigs. The short answer: absolutely. Now, can we squish down notebooks and still get a good game experience? Let's find out!



BUYING INTO THE DREAM

Building a laptop from scratch is out of the question. Yes, you can do it, with the help of a thousand-dollar bare-bones laptop frame from Asus (www.asus.com) or MSI (www.msicomputer.com), but by the time you've configured it for gaming, you're paying more than you would for a high-end boutique-made machine—and getting less for your money. It just doesn't make sense.

Consider what the gaming-focused manufacturers are cranking out these days: VoodooPC (www.voodoopc.com) and Alienware (www.alienware.com) constantly duke it out for the title of most powerful laptop. Machines like Voodoo's Envy W:201 and Alienware's Area-51 m9750 wedge blazing processors and SLI video into portable form-factors with huge screens. As this arms race escalates, so do prices. Do you have as much as seven grand in the bank to buy a portable computer?

Luckily, it's now possible to score a solid game machine from even the most vanilla corporate outlet. By taking just a small step down you can save as much as $4,000. Companies like Gateway and Dell are putting out reasonably competent machines for half, or even a third, of the price.

So, should you even buy a notebook computer? Well, that's a question only you can answer. You need to go in understanding not just your own needs but the benefits and limitations of what's out there. Lucky for you, we've done a lot of the legwork. Here's a lightning-fast breakdown of what you need to find under the hood if you're hoping to score an all-around solid machine that won't break the bank.

Screening Room. Don't settle for less than a 17-inch WSXGA+ (1680x1050) LCD—and moving up to a WUXGA (1920x1200) resolution is usually a small jump in price. Keep in mind that getting games running silky-smooth at high resolutions requires a little extra money and video muscle. >

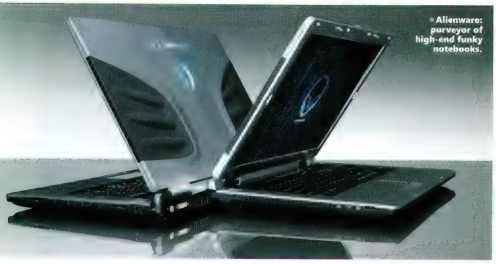
TWEAK THE CORPORATE CRAP-PAD

If you're trying to game on a machine your employer gave you, these tweaks may be your best bet for squeezing some gaming life out of that ho-hum notebook (after all, most IT departments frown upon users installing their own hardware). You won't be parading your machine around at LAN parties, but some optimization just might squeeze a few more months of gaming life out of your corporate machine, and may speed up even the most powerful machine. Let's take it step-by-step.

- **Set a restore point.** You don't want to make the IT guys angry, right?
- **Clean that spyware.** Spybot-Search and Destroy (www.safer-networking.org) and Ad-Aware (www.lavasoft.com) are the two leading spyware sweepers. They each have slightly different detection methods, so for the deepest system cleaning, run both of them.
- **Tidy up running processes.** While we can expect our spyware scans to eliminate the most bothersome processes, there may still be some unnecessary items running in the background. Check out Process Library (www.processlibrary.com) to determine what you don't need.
- **Disable unneeded services.** While you'll find many sites that offer advice on what to keep and what to trash, one of the most helpful (and entertaining!) guides comes from blogger "Jasonn" (www.jasonn.com). Visit his Computer Help section for the article "Turn Off Unnecessary Windows XP Services."
- **Defrag your hard drive.** Of course, you already do this on a regular basis, right? Right?
- **Turn off Windows' fancy graphical effects.** This frees up some memory for the good stuff.
- **Perform a full hard-drive install whenever possible.** This can reduce load times and speed up gameplay.
- **Aim lower.** Remember: Be realistic. You're sacrificing speed for the sake of portability; you shouldn't expect to be able to play with all the graphical effects maxed out. That's just crazy!

KING GAME MACHINE!

Part Two: Laptops



• Alienware: purveyor of high-end funky notebooks.

Graphic Violence. When it comes to graphics cards, one maxim holds true: With great power comes an even greater price tag. To feed that image-hungry screen you're going to want a 256MB GeForce Go 7900 GS. Step up to the 512MB Go 7950 GTX and you'll get solid desktop-like performance. As of press time, SLI (scalable link interface) notebooks are available that double your performance—like SLI does on desktops—and it'll *only* cost you an additional $400. Only? Yeesh! Then there's the small matter of mobile DirectX 10–friendly graphics cards—as in you won't see one in a computer until early this summer. So all you *Crysis*-crazed gamers might want to hang back a couple months.

Brain Power. The prices for processors vary a bit more here, but a 2GHz Intel Core 2 Duo will do just fine; you can move up to a 2.16GHz chip for a nominal charge, but beyond that you're going to start paying the bleeding-edge tax. It's probably not worth making the upgrade until the 2.33GHz CPUs start coming down in price.

Sweet Memory. When it comes to RAM, look for at least 1GB on a single DIMM, though many manufacturers are offering 2GB for a reasonable premium. Just don't make the jump to 4GB of RAM. That "bigger, better, faster, more!" mentality doesn't jive because you get seriously diminished returns on your money.

Hard Driven. What *is* worth extra cash is a 7,200-rpm hard drive. Available at 100GB sizes, 7,200-rpm drives pick up the pace.

Wirelessness. Though it may or may not be a big deal to you, be on the lookout for notebooks that offer 802.11n support. Afraid you might be jumping on the "n" bandwagon a little too soon? Some mixed-standard devices still work with 802.11a, b, and g standards.

The Bottom Line. All this can be yours for a reasonable price—a mere $2,000 should buy you a notebook with the specs you have here. It won't blow your eyeballs out, but it'll hold its own with reasonably recent games. Also, consider protecting your mobile investment (being on the road means added potential for damage) with a warranty. Just make sure to do your research as to what you need and what exactly the warranty covers.

NEW LIFE FOR OLD GEAR

Now, perhaps you don't have a spare two (or three or seven) grand lying around the house, but you do have a notebook that's getting on in years. Can that jalopy catch up with the 21st century? Within reason, yes. There's not much standardization among laptop manufacturers, so there's not a lot you can tinker with under the hood—but you'd be surprised how much a few smart upgrades can help.

Did you know that the vast majority of laptop hard drives spin at a paltry 5,400 rpm, and some even run at 4,200 rpm? By comparison, the desktop standard is 7,200 rpm, and you can find gamer-focused desktop drives at speeds of 10,000 rpm (though laptop

YOUR TWEAKING COMPANION

Different types of laptops offer different degrees of upgradeability. Here are the kinds of performance improvements you can expect.

		THE LIGHTWEIGHT If you've got an ultraportable or low-end corporate machine, your options are limited.	THE MIDLINE If your machine is a modest performer—but still a performer—you've got a bit more headroom to stretch out.	THE DESKTOP REPLACEMENT Desktop replacements still don't offer as many upgrade options as true desktops, but there's definitely room to expand.
SOFTWARE	Spyware scan	Significant improvement. With limited resources, reclaiming just a few MBs of memory and a few processor cycles can make a substantial difference.	Moderate improvement. You're not running as close to the edge here.	Minimal improvement, except for the most system-intensive games.
SOFTWARE	Purge unnecessary processes, services	Moderate improvement	Moderate improvement	Minimal improvement
SOFTWARE	Defrag hard drive	Significant improvement. With a small hard drive, you've probably been uninstalling old software whenever you add something new. This leaves little bits all over your drive.	Moderate improvement	Minimal improvement
SOFTWARE	Disable Windows effects	Moderate improvement	Minimal improvement. With more headroom things like this just don't matter as much.	Minimal improvement
SOFTWARE	Hard-drive install	Minimal improvement. You probably don't have the space.	Moderate improvement	Moderate improvement
SOFTWARE	Minimize game configuration	Significant improvement. Because you probably can't run it at all otherwise.	Minimal improvement	Minimal improvement
HARDWARE	Processor	Probably not possible. Your mobo likely doesn't support anything faster than what's in there now.	Minimal improvement. May be possible, but don't expect a huge leap in speed.	Minimal improvement. If you bought a pricey machine, chances are it has the most powerful CPU the motherboard supports.
HARDWARE	Video	Don't even think about it.	No chance.	You might get very, very lucky here and find a machine with a swappable card. But you'll probably pay through the nose for it.
HARDWARE	RAM	Major improvement—but you may not be able to go higher than a single 1GB DIMM.	Major improvement. You should be able to move up to a comfortable 2GB without too much of an investment.	Minor improvement. You should be able to jump up to 4GB, but it'll cost you dearly, and you may not feel it much at this point.
HARDWARE	Hard drive	Significant improvement. Do it. Do it now. Just make sure the drive will actually fit.	Moderate improvement. Most machines in this class ship with 5,400-rpm drives.	Minimal improvement. You're probably already running a 7,200-rpm drive.

drives have yet to achieve this speed). This means that, with a simple hard drive swap, you could boost your access time by as much as 70 percent.

Well, OK, perhaps "simple" isn't the best way to describe it. If you're used to the "open, swap, and close" method of replacing desktop components, you may be in for a bit of a shock, but it's nothing you can't handle. First, pick up a new hard drive; we recommend the 100GB 7,200-rpm Hitachi Travelstar 7K100 (www.hitachigst.com). Now you'll need to hunt around on them there Intertubes for the proper way to open your laptop. Since each manufacturer is different, there's not much we can do to help here; some notebooks offer hard drive access from the bottom of the unit while others require you to remove the keyboard to access the components beneath. Just be prepared with your smallest screwdrivers and a steady hand. You'll do fine. We believe in you.

You should notice at least a small speed boost upon upgrading your hard drive, but RAM will make your notebook feel like a new machine. It's just a matter of getting the most performance for your pennies. If your humble notebook boasts the industry-standard 512MB of RAM—or, heaven forbid, 256MB—you need to swap those sticks out, stat! Many manufacturers make memory a bit more accessible than the rest of your notebook's innards, providing handy doors on the underside to access the goods. With RAM as cheap as it is these days (expect to pay around $80 a gigabyte), there's really no reason not to upgrade.

And what about that videocard? Surely you can just swap that out too, right? Trust us on this one: This is not a road you want to go down. Yes, it's theoretically possible to upgrade video on a laptop. Some older machines offered upgradeable cards (which are now hopelessly out of date), but aside from that small minority, you'd need to be an electrical engineer to even get started. Of course, there are always other options. For example, you could get yourself a PC card–to-PCI adaptor, allowing you to harness the blazing speed of a PCI videocard (note: *not* PCIe) for a mere $1,000. Or you could track down a dock for your specific machine with similar functions for a similar price...but then you wouldn't really have a portable machine, would you? Best to leave this one alone. If your laptop's video just can't hack it, you're better off just picking up a new machine.

WAIT AND SEE

Of course, the state of the art's always changing. As laptop makers embrace smaller, newer technology, today's king of the mountain could be tomorrow's castoff. Imminent DirectX 10 support is just one factor. The overarching theme among the companies we spoke to is simply more: more memory, more hard drive space, and more support for gaming in general—especially from the manufacturers who have traditionally been less focused on gaming.

"Getting into the gaming market and growing though retail is very important," says Dave McFarland, a product manager at Toshiba. "We're working with game developers and gamers. Being mobile and being able to play games is important to us."

HP's recent acquisition of gaming-PC powerhouse Voodoo is indicative of this trend. Rahul Sood, chief technologist of HP's global gaming business, believes laptop manufacturers are going to need to keep raising the bar to support gaming demand. "Vista sales are going to be driven by gaming, I believe," he says. "As a result of that, you need to have the graphics power to be able to support it."

For some ideas of what to expect in the near future, we turned to one of our own experts, ExtremeTech.com's big cheese—Loyd Case. "The real question is 'how large can notebooks become?'" he says. "We've already seen 'laptops' with 20-inch widescreens. That's not a laptop, really, but some kind of weird hybrid desktop-laptop...thing. The sweet spot for high-end laptops will continue to be 17-inch widescreen displays, but as CPUs and GPUs become more capable, we hope to see better 15.4-inch widescreen laptops weighing under six pounds that can handle most future games." Case also cites LED-lit screens and hybrid or all-Flash hard drives as features to watch for as laptops evolve.

Will we get to the point where laptops can genuinely compete with desktops at similar price points and configurations? "Anything is possible," says HP's Sood. "A few years ago, you never would have expected people to carry around this type of graphics power in a notebook in the first place. The industry changes. I'll never be surprised at what new comes out of the industry." ●

WILL WE GET TO A POINT WHERE LAPTOPS CAN GENUINELY COMPETE WITH DESKTOPS AT SIMILAR PRICES AND CONFIGURATIONS?

YOUR SHOPPING COMPANION

The laptop market straddles a wide range of price, power, and configurations. Here's what to expect at different price points.

	THE LIGHTWEIGHT The darling of the corporate set, this category's light on weight and power. Older games (and, you know, *Minesweeper*) work fine, just don't expect to play anything from the last couple years without serious performance issues.	THE MIDLINE Get into real gaming territory without dropping too much green. A middle-of-the-road machine balances price with performance. You'll find plenty to keep you busy without embarrassing yourself too much.	THE DESKTOP REPLACEMENT This is the state of the art. With SLI and RAID support in notebooks, these puppies will run anything you can throw at them. However, you will pay dearly for all that power. So, how badly do you want the ballsiest notebook on the block?
TYPICAL CONFIGURATION...			
Typical machine	Dell Latitude D620 HP Pavillion dv6000t	Gateway NX860XL, Toshiba Satellite P100-S9752	Alienware Area-51 m9570, Voodoo Envy W:201
Processor	1.66GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T5500	2GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7200	2.33GHz Core 2 Duo T7600 or 2GHz Turion 64 X2 TL-60
Video	GeForce Go 7300 or similar	GeForce Go 7900 GS or similar	GeForce Go 7950 GTX (x2 in SLI)
RAM	512MB	2GB	2GB to 4GB
Hard Drive	60GB; 5,400 rpm	80GB; 7,200 rpm	100GB (x2); 7,200 rpm
LCD	14.1 inches; 1440x900 resolution	17 inches; 1680x1050 resolution	17 or 19 inches; 1920x1200 resolution
Approx. weight	4 lbs.	9 lbs.	15 lbs.
Price range	$1,200 to $1,400	$1,800 to $2,900	$4,000 to $7,000
WILL IT RUN...?			
...Half-Life 2	Yep	Of course	Oh, yes
...World of WarCraft	Yes, barely	Yes	No doubt
...Company of Heroes	Not likely	Yes	With ease
...Supreme Commander	Nope	Yes, but not at max settings	Absolutely
...The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	Keep dreaming, kid	Nope	Like butter

NOTEWORTHY

Middleweight notebooks battle it out

Toshiba Satellite P100-S9772: Can a notebook be slightly sexy, serious, and playful all at once?

Budget laptops can barely power through *Peggle*. Bleeding-edge boxes run neck and neck with desktop monster machines—but usually cost more than a used car. Where does that leave us gamers? Broke and screwed. We sought out two game-worthy notebooks that hover around that price and performance sweet spot and paired them off for some tech-dork kumite. Fight!

IN THIS CORNER: GATEWAY NX860XL

Heavy duty. No nonsense. Just a few words to describe the plucky NX860XL. At first glance, it doesn't look like your usual gaming machine: no flashy racing stripes, no runner lights—nobody is pimping this 8.5-pound (sans power brick) ride.

But Gateway's gamer can hold its own. The NX860XL has a solid foundation, built upon Intel's 2.16GHz Core 2 Duo T7400 and 2GB DDR2 SDRAM (two 1GB sticks). The only downer is the GeForce Go 7900 GS. While the 256MB graphics card is no slouch, it's already slipping behind the 3D curve. Still, it's enough to put up a good fight.

In our tests, *F.E.A.R.*, *Half-Life 2*—even *Company of Heroes*—ran reasonably well. In all but the most excruciating tests, the NX860XL was able to keep a steady pace. *Supreme Commander*, however, broke the NX860XL's back, slogging along at 30 frames per second. Lesson here: You still need to set realistic expectations—especially with notebooks.

Looking beyond performance, how does the rest of the package hold up? The crisp 17-inch display (with a maximum 1680-by-1050 resolution) is moderately bright at a good range of viewing angles. Complementing the screen are speakers that devolve into a tinny mess upon entering the crunk zone. Stick with headphones. Then there's the keyboard: The well-apportioned key spacing is perfect for gaming, but there are no hard controls for the hardware—a volume knob, shortcut keys, stuff like that. You do, however, get the full complement of now-standard features: VGA and S-Video outs, a host of USB ports, a FireWire jack, and a 5-in-1 card reader. All told, the NX860XL is a sweet deal for about $1,960.

IN THIS CORNER: TOSHIBA SATELLITE P100-S9772

At 7.5 pounds, Toshiba's S9772 floats like a butterfly and stings like...well...you get the idea. The Satellite is, without a doubt, a stunner. Well constructed and glossy to the touch, this notebook feels premium before you even fire it up.

Unlike with the relatively vanilla NX860XL, we had to first stop and stare at some of this notebook's finer features. The Satellite bristles with shortcut buttons, analog dials for audio, good speakers, a DVI output, virtual shortcuts embedded into the touch pad—even a James Bond-ian fingerprint reader onboard. Who the hell needs all this?

Speaking of which, thanks for all the preinstalled software. Five minutes of deletions later, it's playtime. Right from the get-go, Toshiba's benchmark scores were almost completely on par with Gateway's results. The Satellite scored a few early hits—and miraculously scored well in *Supreme Commander*—but there was never a knockout punch. In just about every round, the Toshiba was maybe just a handful of frames per second faster. We expected better since the Satellite costs almost $1,000 more than the NX860XL.

HARDWARE SPECS

Gateway NX860XL

CPU:	2.16GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7400
RAM:	2GB 667MHz DDR2 SDRAM
GPU:	256MB GeForce Go 7900 GS
HDD:	80GB; 7,200 rpm
LCD:	17-inch WSXGA+ TFT Active Matrix display 1680x1050 max. resolution
PRICE:	$1,960

Toshiba Satellite P100-S9772

CPU:	2GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7200
RAM:	2GB 667MHz DDR2 SDRAM
GPU:	512MB GeForce Go 7900 GTX
HDD:	160GB; 5,400 rpm
LCD:	17-inch WSXGA+ with TruBrite technology 1680x1050 max. resolution
PRICE:	$2,900

THE TALE OF THE TAPE

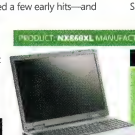
The relatively equal numbers are the result of a couple things: The Toshiba dominates in GPU muscle (512MB GeForce Go 7900 GTX), but falls behind the Gateway on both CPU and hard drive speeds—Toshiba, why the hell would you put a 5,400-rpm hard drive in a gamingcentric rig? And Gateway, would a better GPU chip have killed the NX860XL's price? If either side had made a couple smarter moves inside the ring, this would be an easy fight to call.

What we wind up with is a split decision. If you're gaming on a budget, Gateway takes the title. It may not have all the premiums or the silky feel of Toshiba's notebook, but it works without a hitch. That said, you still can't dispute the numbers. Thanks largely to sheer GPU muscle, Toshiba *just* wins the numbers game and has a few extra features to flaunt for a lot more money. Want to showboat a little? Then the S9772 is your winner. ● **Darren Gladstone**

	Game Resolution	Frames Per Second (NX860XL)	Frames Per Second (P100-S9772)
Company of Heroes	1024 x 768	47	50
	1680 x 1050	27	28
F.E.A.R.	1024 x 768	74	80
	1680 x 1050	44	50
Half-Life 2	1024 x 768	110	117
	1680 x 1050	99	101
Supreme Commander	1024 x 768	30.38	55.16
W.E.I.* Score		4.5	4.5

NOTE: Frames-per-second measurements taken at "medium" settings.
*Windows Experience Index

PRODUCT: **NX860XL** MANUFACTURER: **Gateway** PRICE: **$1,960**



VERDICT

+ Good game performance at a reasonable price.

+ A little on the generic-box side, with a few extras.

8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL STANDARD

PRODUCT: **P100-S9772** MANUFACTURER: **Toshiba** PRICE: **$2,900**

VERDICT

+ Looks and feels premium, with lots of extras and solid game performance.

+ Considering the price, we'd have liked to see better benchmark scores.

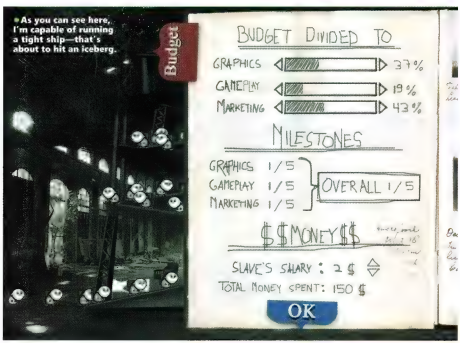
8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL STANDARD

GLADSTONED

Get a haircut, get a new job



COLUMN

Darren Gladstone

I don't make videogames, I just write about them. Well, that's not *entirely* true. There was some "groundbreaking" work on a text adventure for my Texas Instruments TI-99/4A. And I did try to make an FPS map once. Granted, my half-assed *Half-Life* could've used some polish—and maybe a couple stairs to get people out of unfinished pits.

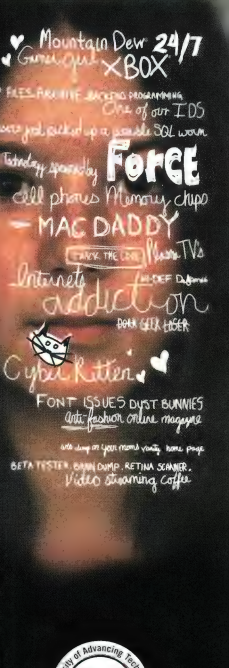
Nevertheless, I gave up a potential mansion in the hills to follow my journalistic pipe dreams. Great call. Now I sit huddled around the glow of an old CRT screen, avoiding the glare of Old Man Green. When he's at lunch, diving into Scrooge McDuck–sized piles of cash, I find myself listening for the microwave's siren song telling me it's ramen cup o' noodles o'clock—and wondering what my life could have been. Why so glum? I just learned that the average salary for game industry folks hovers around $73,000. That's a *lot* of useless action figures to put on my desk! The lowest-paid workers are QA testers ($37K a year) and the highest-paid, business and legal peeps, rake in over $95 grand.

Why, with my skill set, I have plenty to contribute. I mean, I've covered the game industry for 10 years. Something must've stuck in my head, right? To test my mettle, I downloaded *The Truth About Game Development* (www.kloonigames.com).

Here's how it works: Wage slaves (read "game developers") clamber along like lemmings, toiling away on my new megagame: *Rumble on Zombie Island in 3D*. As the simulation progresses, you juggle the focus of the game's development between graphics, gameplay, and marketing. The real trick is encouraging that group work dynamic so that your developers make the occasional contribution. "Originality is always good for reviews, but bad for the marketing. Should the slaves be allowed to implement their ideas?" You know my answer—"*hell no!*"

Oh, yeah, and you need to make sure that you "pay" your slaves their worth. The going rate at Gladisoft: $2. What? That's not enough for those lousy ingrates? Just the other day, one of them asked if I could relax the deadlines a little so that they could maybe play some games during work hours. Why, I laughed so hard tears poured down my face. Then I killed him. Yes, with a mere flick of the cursor, I exploded his head—and down went the would-be Norma Rae. Y'know, just like in the real world. If only there were a "kick a small puppy" option, I'd be all set.

In all my attempts to make it big, I bombed. Big time. The best return on my investment totaled around 31 percent of what I dropped to make my game a virtual reality. Watch out Valve, here I come: the Uwe Boll of game design! Now, I'd hardly say that *The Truth About Game Development* is a realistic depiction of how a game publisher works—killing peons and all—but it does get me thinking. A lot goes into game design that gamers and game magazine editors don't see. It can't be all black and white. I can't imagine a bunch of moneyhats cranking out crap games and expecting to rake in megabucks. You know anyone content to churn out garbage with his or her name emblazoned upon it? I don't. Well, except for....●



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MY THEORY OF FUN

An academic treatise on gaming's primary essence

COLUMN

Jeff Green

Jeff's theory of fun is also available in coloring book form for the low price of $39.95 plus shipping. Reserve your copy now at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

As someone who writes about entertainment for a living, and as somewhat of an entertainer myself, what with my whole salami-juggling act, I am often concerned with the notion of "fun." Specifically: What is it? Why am I not having any? And why, when it happens, does it always seem to involve grape jelly and a gorilla suit?

Many theories of fun have been presented before, but what previous theorists have failed to realize is that once you start theorizing about fun, no one listening to you is actually having any. But not this time. For the next 900 words, I guarantee you a completely good time. How do I do that? By telling you this: *I am typing this column completely in the nude.* See? You're having more fun already. Nudity is, in fact, a big part of my theory of fun. Also: Cheetos. More like *Fun*tos...amirite?

In any event, we should not descend into complete frivolity here, even when the topic is fun, because, as we all know, fun is big business these days. With literally millions—or, in the case of PC games, hundreds—of dollars at stake, game publishers cannot afford to make games that lack that crucial ingredient, no matter how many 3D polygonal breasts they try to distract us with. Which is why I have compiled this handy list of certain basic tenets for you aspiring game developers to keep in mind while designing your game. While I cannot promise that by following these rules your game will be a success, I can say with great certainty that if you ignore them your game will suck and I will hate you forever.

With this is mind, here is my five-point theory of fun:

1 **EASY IS FUN.** Make your games as easy as possible. No one really wants to be challenged—we just want to win. Yes, yes, we will say otherwise, especially in front of our friends or on message boards, where we are all chest-beating übergods. But late at night, when no one else is around and the lights are dim, we are turning on cheat codes, peeking at walkthroughs, and taking every conceivable shortcut that we can because, look, we just want to get to the end already. Studies show that the average time spent figuring out a puzzle before giving up and consulting a message board is approximately 5.3 seconds. My point: Assume we're morons. Then make it easier. Then put big arrows on the screen telling us where to go. Then add cheat codes.

2 **GRIEFING IS FUN.** How often does this happen to you? You're walking down the street, minding your own business, when you suddenly projectile vomit and then slip in it and hit your head on the pavement. If you're like me, dozens of times. And it's never "fun," is it? But imagine this same thing happening to a stranger, or one of your close friends, or your mom. Point-and-laugh time, right? This same phenomenon applies to computer games. *Fun is other people's misery.* This is why you must always include the ability in your game for me to humiliate players worse than me. After a hard day at work here playing *Peggle* and downloading funny YouTube videos, I find nothing more satisfying than logging on to an online game and killing players who have no chance of defending themselves against me. Why? Because they are noobs, and noobs must die. This is not cruelty, friends. This is natural selection. If they deserved to live, they would not be noobs. So we must kill them. And so we shall.

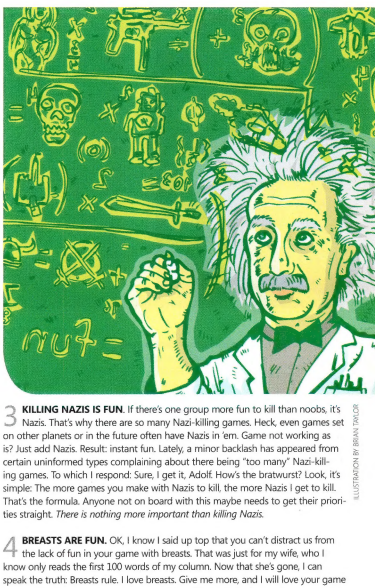

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

3 **KILLING NAZIS IS FUN.** If there's one group more fun to kill than noobs, it's Nazis. That's why there are so many Nazi-killing games. Heck, even games set on other planets or in the future often have Nazis in 'em. Game not working as is? Just add Nazis. Result: instant fun. Lately, a minor backlash has appeared from certain uninformed types complaining about there being "too many" Nazi-killing games. To which I respond: Sure, I get it, Adolf. How's the bratwurst? Look, it's simple: The more games you make with Nazis to kill, the more Nazis I get to kill. That's the formula. Anyone not on board with this maybe needs to get their priorities straight. *There is nothing more important than killing Nazis.*

4 **BREASTS ARE FUN.** OK, I know I said up top that you can't distract us from the lack of fun in your game with breasts. That was just for my wife, who I know only reads the first 100 words of my column. Now that she's gone, I can speak the truth: Breasts rule. I love breasts. Give me more, and I will love your game forever. I don't even care where you put them. They can be floating in space, on top of cars, hidden in barrels. More breasts equals more fun. Come to think of it, never mind about the Nazis. *There is nothing more important than breasts.*

5 **CHEATING IS FUN.** You overcharged me for your game. You made me update my graphics card and RAM and install all sorts of wanky drivers that I didn't want on my PC. But now the game is mine. This means I'm going to play it my way, not yours. So if I want to save every two seconds, or walk through walls, or give myself 80 extra lives, well, more power to me. Please don't waste precious development time that you could be using to put more breasts in barrels by trying to prevent me from cheating. I will get around it anyway. Really. Don't bother.

This, then, is my theory of fun. Read it, learn it, live it. Because what is a game without fun? Yes, that's right, friends. A flight sim. ● **Jeff Green**

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